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OR, YANKEE EPH'S PRAIRIE CRUISE.

A Romance of Old Texan Days.

BY HENRY J. THOMAS.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRAIRIE FIGHT.

LOOKING northwest on that summer evening, the three rangers saw a lurid light against the sky, as if made by some burning building, or the beginning of a vast prairie conflagration.

The hunters reined up their horses side by side, and for a few minutes neither of them spoke, while their eyes were turned toward the illumination, in their earnest seeking to understand its meaning.

"Thar's one thing sart'in," exclaimed Black

ALMOST SIMULTANEOUS WITH A PECULIAR WHISTLE OF BLACK GEORGE, THE THREE MUSTANGS DROPPED FLAT UPON THE GROUND, THEIR MASTERS IMITATING THEIR EXAMPLE.

George, slapping his horny palm upon his knee, "it ain't the *perairie*."

"Be you sure of that?" inquired his companion, who answered to the name of Long Eph.

"Ef I ain't, then may my ha'r be raised by the next Comanche."

"Yas, ye'r right," chimed in Jake Jaggerton, speaking for the first time. "It's nigh onto a half-hour, when we fu'st thought we seed the moon comin' up, and sin' that time, the light has growed brighter, but it hain't spread a rod either way."

"That's the ijee," added Black George; "don't ye see ef it war the perarie-grass, the thing would have spread out like a fan, till by this time it would have been a mile wide?"

There was logic in this, certainly, and the three rangers were satisfied that the light was not caused by that much-dreaded thing, a prairie-fire.

"But skulp me ef I wouldn't be a little better pleased ef it war the grass," remarked Eph, a moment later.

"Why so?" inquired Jake.

"As near as I kin judge, that 'ere fire lays about ten mile to the north'ard, and ef you'll take a tramp for that distance, toward that p'nt of the compass, it's my opine ye'll strike the *hacienda* of Comanche Dick."

Curious it was that the other two had not thought of this until it was mentioned by their companion!

Comanche Dick, as the singular character was known in the far Southwest, a full generation ago, was their own leader, and they were returning to him, at this time, when the light in the northern sky caught their attention.

The three hunters, thus briefly referred to, were all Americans, as was their leader. Having fought side by side, for a number of years during the Texan struggle for independence, with Comanche Dick, they had withdrawn with him, and retired to a chosen spot in New Mexico, where they lived such a wild, wandering life as was precisely suited to their tastes.

Black George was a short, iron-limbed fellow, greatly resembling in physique the famous Kit Carson, except that his complexion was so dark as to raise a strong suspicion of the purity of his blood.

Long Eph was a thin, attenuated, muscular fellow, fully six feet and a half in height, with a yellow, cadaverous countenance, and hair as long and black as an Indian's, his eyes glittering and scintillating with an almost unnatural brightness.

Jake Jaggerton was a compromise, so far as general appearance went, between the two. He was of ordinary height, and, as there was nothing extraordinary or peculiar in his appearance, we pass him, at this point, without further notice.

What was rather a coincidence, the ages of these three men did not vary by so many years. Their long association had seemed to run their dispositions into something like a similar mold, and, whether it was in the hand-to-hand encounter with the fierce Comanche or Apache, or the wild excitement of the chase, or the monotonous ride through the Staked Plain, or over the burning prairie, there occurred no jarring word of discord between them.

"I b'l'eve the old place is goin'," said Black George, in reply to the remark of Eph, as the three started their mustangs on a walk, "and, as luck has it, we're too fur away to have a hand in the matter."

"That's bad," added Jake, unconsciously urging his horse into a gallop. "Dick can take care of himself, but what'll become of the old woman?"

"Isn't she as good as *him*?" almost fiercely demanded Eph; "but the *gal*—thar's whar the diffikiltiy is. What'll become of *her*?"

"Poor critter! She's had her sorers, but it looks as though she ain't done with 'em yit."

"Oh! if we war only *thar*," fairly groaned Black George. "It's a good ten mile, every inch of it."

"And afore we kin pass it, with these yar mustangs ready to drop with the trampin' they've had to-day, the whole pack of yellin' Comanches will do thar worst."

But it was not in the nature of the men to remain idle when there was any scrimmage in which they could mingle, or when there was any friend who needed their assistance; and, although their mustangs were excessively tired from their day's hunt, yet the three now thundered over the prairie, with the apparent freshness of coursers just starting upon a race.

All this time the lurid light gleamed in the northern horizon, like a beacon signal calling to them to hasten, for every moment now was of incalculable value.

The prairie was mostly of the rolling kind, and their animals regularly ascended and descended the swells until several miles were passed, when the horse of Black George, which was slightly in advance of the others, threw up his head with a snort of alarm, and came to a sudden halt.

The other well-trained mustangs did the same, and horses and riders stood as motionless as statues cast in bronze.

This meant *danger*, and the rangers comprehended the situation at once. Not a word was spoken, but all three listened. Naught but the soft rustling of the night-wind came to their ears, and in the darkness which surrounded them, they could detect no shadow or sign of peril.

But at this moment, between them and the fire, outlined like ink against the lurid glare of the horizon, they detected the forms of several horsemen, riding nearly in a direct line toward them.

"*Comanches!*" whispered Long Eph. The word was scarcely uttered, when the three rangers were on the ground, with rifles cocked and ready for the encounter. The tramp of the approaching feet could be heard, when suddenly they ceased. The red-skins, too, had scented danger.

For a few seconds there was absolute silence, and then a single rifle, fired by one of the Comanches, broke the stillness.

As quick as lightning, almost simultaneous with a peculiar whistle of Black George, the three mustangs dropped flat upon the ground, their masters imitating their example.

The sagacious brutes had long since learned that when bullets were flying like hailstones about them, the safest position was upon the earth, and the instant they comprehended that they were in an "Indian scrimmage," they did not forget the lesson that had been taught them a long time before.

At the very instant of the discharge of the red-skin's gun, Jake Jaggerton fired at the spot where he saw the flash of flame. A frenzied shriek told the result, and the prairie-fight was fairly opened.

The Comanche of the Southwest is one of the most formidable foes that the hunter or settler have to encounter. Possessing the most remarkable skill in horsemanship, his bravery is unsurpassed by even the Texans, who for so many years successfully resisted the overwhelming hordes of Mexicans that swarmed down upon them.

A more independent set live not upon the earth; they are ready at all times to fight any and all comers, and after drumming a party of Mexicans who were struggling with a band of Texans, they have often turned about and pitched into the latter with equal gusto.

The Comanches on the present occasion numbered fully twenty, a fact of which the rangers were well aware, although, from the disadvantageous position of the former, they did not understand the weakness of their enemies. But each one had encountered a foeman worthy of his steel, and a fierce fight was the inevitable sequel.

Some fifteen minutes passed, without another shot being fired, when the red-skins gave evidence of impatience—such an unnatural thing on their part, that the shrewd hunters suspected at once that there was an equally unusual cause for it.

There was some reason for their wishing to hasten onward, although they were not the ones to show any cowardice on that account.

The red-skins having dismounted, one of their number crept forward for the evident purpose of reconnoitering the position of the rangers. On his hands and knees he cautiously advanced, now and then pausing and raising his head, after the stealthy manner of a wild animal.

In this way he crept along until he was within a dozen feet of the crouching form of Black George. Even then neither combatant suspected the presence or proximity of the other, until the almost inaudible gliding sound of the Indian's knee betrayed his precise position to the hunter.

The latter had his pistol in hand, with the hammer raised, and his arm moved, so as to bring it round to the front, while he peered intently through the gloom, to catch the first glimpse of the red-skin.

No doubt the Comanche held a suspicion that every inch he advanced increased his peril; for, during the space of the next five minutes, he did not move a muscle, holding himself in rigid, motionless silence, to catch some inadvertent betrayal of their positions on the part of the whites. But these were as careful as they, and he discovered nothing.

Another step was made by the Comanche, and he slowly arose to the sitting position by gradually straightening his arms. This precise movement was suspected by Black George, and when the skull of the red-skin came between him and the dark sky, he distinctly caught the outline and instantly fired.

The two were so close together that there could be but one result, and the ear-splitting screech of the Comanche was followed by his death-throes.

Without pausing to reload, Black George rolled over and over several times, so as to carry him several feet from the spot. He had not been an instant too soon; for the jet of fire from the muzzle of his pistol betrayed his position to a dozen malignant eyes, whose glances were flitting hither and thither through the gloom, for some such signal as this.

There was the simultaneous crack of four rifles, and as many bullets plowed their way through the dirt and grass, where, a moment before, they would have plowed their way through the body of the ranger.

Black George heard the rasping of the bullets, and smiled grimly as he rammed another charge down his pistol.

"Ef I'd only laid thar—but I didn't!"

In the meantime, the other rangers were by no means idle. Knowing their horses would remain quiescent where they were crouching, they gave no further thought to them; but in the same stealthy manner as their comrades, they crawled away in precisely opposite directions.

They had some apprehension that the Comanches would discover their weakness and attempt to surround them; and to give them an exaggerated idea of their strength, they separated, moving from the center, where their horses were crouching, like the radiating spokes of a wheel.

Until the shot of Black George, and the returning fire of the Comanches, neither Eph nor Jake could discover their location, although they had carefully maneuvered up to that time. There was too much risk in their firing, before they could be certain of accomplishing something; and although they had strong suspicions of where the red-skins were lurking in the grass, yet they patiently waited the opportune moment.

Long Eph had a way of gliding over the ground that resembled the movement of a serpent more than anything else. Precisely how it was done, it would be impossible to say. He seemed to lie perfectly flat upon his face, and with a sort of swaying motion, glided forward with a noiselessness which was marvelous.

In this manner he passed perhaps a couple of rods, when he became satisfied that he was approaching one of his enemies, although it was impossible to distinguish anything through the long grass.

But the sound which caught his ear was like the sigh of a person—an indiscretion which the most broken-hearted ranger would not commit at such a moment, and which he wondered at an Indian making under the circumstances.

Thus warned, Eph advanced with all the skill of which he was capable, until through the obscurity he managed to discern a horse, crouched upon the ground, with his head raised as though not quite enough certain of the character of the approaching object to give his master the alarm.

It was at this moment that Black George discharged his pistol, and, for the instant, drew the attention of all the Comanches toward that point. Taking advantage of this momentary diversion, Eph slid along the ground, and in an instant was beside the mustang of the red-skin.

The animal neither snorted nor gave any symptoms of alarm, although, from his well-known sagacity, there can be no doubt that he saw something was wrong. He continued as motionless as though it were his own master that was maneuvering around him, and scarcely turned his head aside to glance at the stranger by his side.

This indifference upon the part of the most suspicious of animals, in fact, gave the man some uneasiness; but it was quickly explained.

Long Eph had placed himself in the most delicate and dangerous situation of his life; for, upon the other side of the mustang, was crouching a stalwart Comanche, only awaiting for the proper instant to crush his foe.

The ranger became aware of the proximity of the red-skin from the slightest of taps which he made upon his mustang's shoulder, for the evident purpose of soothing him, and which betrayed his own presence to his enemy.

The instant Eph discovered this, he became satisfied of the tactics his enemy intended to pursue, and prepared himself accordingly. The

Indian undoubtedly meant to make a sudden leap over the back of his horse, and come down upon the shoulders of the hunter.

Had such a maneuver been made, without our friend knowing it, it would have put him in such a bad case of "chancery" that it is certain he never could have extricated himself. One moment—ten seconds—were enough for a brawny savage to be upon his back, with his left arm gripped around his neck, his right hand clutching the knife and driving it "home" with lightning-like rapidity.

So Eph turned partly on his side, but in a secure position, with his own weapon firmly grasped, waiting for the "charge."

Suddenly there was the rush of a dark body overhead, and the deadly encounter took place. The Comanche, instead of taking his fee by surprise, was completely surprised himself. He came down as a wild animal does, when it makes a leap of fear, and instead of alighting upon the shoulders of his prey, he encountered a tremendous cut of a bowie-knife, and rolled over upon his side with the wiry form of the terrible hunter upon him.

The contest was short, sharp and decisive. In a minute the Comanche was "done for," and wiping his weapon in the grass, Long Eph coolly shoved it back in his girdle, muttering to himself:

"That ain't the fu'st, nor the second, nor the tenth red-skin you've finished, old Slasher!"

At this juncture the mustang showed his appreciation of the circumstances by snorting wildly, springing to his feet and dashing away at full speed. Simultaneously, the guns of Jake and Black George flashed, followed by the shrieks of their victims.

Then there was a hurried gathering, and a moment later the Comanches, with their fallen companions upon their own horses, were dashing away over the prairie.

When the three rangers re-united, it was found that neither of them was injured.

"But," said Black George, in a suppressed voice, "I heard a strange sound when they left."

"So did I," added Long Eph; "if I ain't mighty mistook, it war the voice of Senorita Josepha."

CHAPTER II.

A WAIF UPON THE PRAIRIE.

AN eye flitting and restless, but as keen as an eagle's, with a frame thin to emaciation, but made up of bone and muscle as rigid, flexible and tenacious as iron ore from his native State, with a face cadaverous, hard and colorless, cheeks sunken, and with hair as long, stiff and wiry as the mane of his mustang; a man of powerful hates and loves, as daring as a maniacal Apache, but as chivalrous as a knight of the Crusades, with a natural vein of refinement, a fervent veneration of the Most High, and a romantic adoration of the weaker sex permeating every fiber of his being—such a man was Richard Hampton, or Comanche Dick, of New Mexico.

When young, this singular being had been given many advantages in the way of education and social privileges, having been intended for one of the professions; but a restless, wandering disposition drew him southward at an early age, and he espoused the cause of Texas, when the contest began between her and Mexico, throwing his whole soul into the struggle, and fighting side by side with Colonel Bowie and Crockett, until they perished at the Alamo, and until the great victory at San Jacinto, in 1836, secured the independence of the Lone Star Republic.

After this, Comanche Dick, as he was called, from the prowess he displayed in his encounters with the savages, selected a spot in southeastern New Mexico (which was then a Mexican province, and remained so until 1850), a short distance west of *Llano Estacado* or Staked Plain, where he built a house of large dimensions, and with a stock of nearly ten thousand sheep, turned drover. Once every year a large flock was driven to Santa Fe, where their sale brought Dick a handsome sum, which, besides keeping him liberally supplied with funds, left him a goodly surplus to lay by.

Dick called his place the "Hacienda," and it was built with considerable pretension, although it hardly deserved the name, and he gathered about him three kindred spirits, who had followed him through the Texan struggle, and were as devoted to him as were the old guard of Napoleon. They assisted him in the care of his sheep and in driving them to Santa Fe, against the Comanches and Apaches, who were ready at all times to pounce down upon and stampede them.

Dick paid these men liberally for their services; for he was naturally free-hearted, and their presence was not only necessary for the protection of his property, but was required for the safety of his family.

In many portions of New Mexico at that day, as at the present, it is might alone which makes right, and there is no redress for grievances, except in the power of retaliation which the aggrieved party may possess.

The danger which ever surrounded Comanche Dick would have driven many a brave man from his post, but it never stirred him. There was something in the wild excitement of the appalling danger which was thrilling enjoyment to him, and the occasional visits he made to the frontier towns were all-sufficient for him.

Thus several years passed, until Dick and his companions became involved in an affair in which a party of Santa Fe traders were partly massacred and partly captured by a band of red-skins. Dick and his men followed the miscreants to the Zuni Mountains, where they attacked the Indians in turn, slew over a dozen and rescued a white woman from them, the wife of one of the murdered traders. He carried her back to Santa Fe to her friends, and as a matter of course, made several calls upon her when visiting the town. In this manner a feeling of interest gradually ripened into love, and ended in his taking her back to the hacienda as his wife.

Here they lived in perfect happiness, his wife frequently joining him in the chase, as she was as skillful in the management of her horse as the use of her rifle. Whenever she chose, her husband accompanied her to Santa Fe, and nothing that she desired was ever refused her.

Several years passed thus, but no children were ever given them, and their house was gradually strengthened until it assumed almost the character of a fortress. About a year previous to the opening of our story, the entire party were returning from a visit to Santa Fe, and were within twenty miles of home, when they were startled by the sound of firearms, and hurrying forward, found that a small party of white men had just been conquered by a party of Comanches, who were making off with the plunder.

It was too late to do much for the white men, as most of them were already past help, but the Rangers burst upon the red-skins like a thunderbolt, and made them pay dear for the outrage.

From the savages they recaptured only a single prisoner, and she was a girl, who had just been seized by a chief, who was slain by Dick's own hand, ere he would relinquish his prize.

The girl was Josepha Nevarro, a Spanish lady of remarkable beauty, who was on her way to Santa Fe in charge of an escort, to visit an uncle, whom she had not seen since infancy.

Dick and his wife could not have treated their own child with greater kindness. They took her to their home until she had recovered from the terrible shock she had suffered, and then, leaving only one man in charge of the hacienda, they escorted her to Santa Fe.

Here a surprise awaited all parties. In response to their most diligent inquiry, no such person could be found, and after a long search, Dick informed Senorita Josepha that no such person had ever existed in that town.

"He doesn't exist at all!" she exclaimed, with passionate earnestness. "They told me I saw him when I was a child. Perhaps I did; but he is dead now."

"How comes the mistake to be made?" respectfully inquired Dick.

"It was no mistake," she answered, more vehemently than before. "It was a plot—it was intended—"

But here she ceased, and never referred to the matter again. Both Dick and his wife were too well-bred to make any inquiries, although they could not avoid a feeling of considerable curiosity at the turn affairs had taken.

After the senorita had somewhat recovered from her grief, she stated to Comanche Dick that she had no home, and asked whether she might live with them until she had paid them all her money, of which she had with her a considerable sum.

Ah! that was a happy moment for Dick and his wife. It was what they had been hoping ever since they placed eyes upon the Spanish beauty. Without any children of their own, their hearts naturally yearned toward her, for she was very young, just budding into womanhood.

The request she made so timidly was accepted with eager gladness, except that Dick told her that she would go to the hacienda as their daughter; that nothing in the way of payment,

however trifling, would be received from her, and he peremptorily forbade all reference to it.

On the contrary, as the daughter of this singular couple, she was their heir, and every wish of her, that was possible to gratify, should be gratified.

And so the Spanish lady took her residence at the hacienda, where her beauty, her accomplishments, and her genial disposition added a golden sunlight to the place. It was more attractive than ever to Dick, who loved the girl with a fervent, parental affection, which was equally shared by his wife.

Often, while the other Rangers were miles away, looking after the sheep, or hunting over the plains and mountains, Dick was at home, listening to the songs of his wife and his daughter, as he always called her, or engaging in some social game with them.

It was the duty of the Rangers to keep themselves thoroughly "posted" on the Indian signs, and every day, one or all of them made a circuit of the surrounding hills to satisfy themselves as to whether there were any Comanches or Apaches in the neighborhood.

If their experienced eyes detected any thing suspicious, word was immediately carried to their leader, the sheep were driven in a rough sort of inclosure that had been prepared for them, and the hunters were on the alert.

Dick owned several Indian dogs, that showed remarkable sagacity, and had acquired such skill that they greatly assisted whenever such emergency arose. More than once their cunning saved the property, and on two separate occasions was the means of preserving the life of the leader himself.

Now and then the red-skins got the better of the drovers. Just previous to Dick's marriage they stampeded and drove away almost his entire flock, and shortly after Josepha came among them, a troop of Comanches came yelling down upon them with such suddenness that the whites were taken partly by surprise, and lost several thousand from their flocks.

But these were the inevitable risks of such a life, and the equanimity of Comanche Dick was not disturbed in the least. The funds which were safely deposited in Santa Fe were constantly growing, and were able to stand a much larger draft upon them than as yet they had ever been called to sustain.

Senorita Josepha revealed only a few facts regarding herself. Dick learned, without any inquiry, that she was from Galveston; that some relative had sent her, in charge of an escort, to visit an uncle who was said to be living in Santa Fe; and that on their way thither they were attacked by Comanches and all except herself slain.

This attack of the red-skins really saved the life of the girl, for the man who had charge of her had just revealed his intention of robbing and killing her, and undoubtedly would have done it before another night passed over their heads, had he not been prevented in the terrible manner mentioned.

The lady showed that there was some hidden grief at her heart, to which as yet no reference had been made. At times she was abstracted, and sighed, and there was the expression of woe in her face which her friends could not but see. Occasionally in her sleep she was heard to utter a name which never passed her lips when awake, which gave the sagacious wife of Comanche Dick a suspicion of what was partly the trouble, although her adopted mother carefully refrained from allowing her to see that she held any such thought.

Thus matters stood until about a month previous to the opening of our story, when a singular incident occurred that gave a more curious aspect to the history of the senorita.

She had become quite fond of hunting, and one day was riding with no companion except her adopted mother. When they were about a mile from home they suddenly encountered a white man upon horseback. He was a wild, haggard-looking man, and at sight of his face Josepha uttered a shriek of terror and came nigh falling from her horse.

The strange horseman stared at her a moment in silence, and then rode away at a furious gallop.

When Josepha had recovered she was questioned by her mother, but for a time she gave evasive answers, but she finally stated that the man whom they had met was the leader of the escort which had started to take her to Santa Fe, and who she supposed had perished with the others by the hands of the Comanches.

When they returned to the hacienda and acquainted Dick with what had occurred, he instantly mounted his horse and started in pursuit.

of the man, with the resolve to shoot him on sight for the rudeness and threats he had made toward his adopted daughter. He caught sight of him in the distance and gave chase, but to his surprise, the ruffian was better mounted than he, and he soon vanished in the distance, and he returned, nursing his wrath for his next meeting with the man.

For a week Josepha scarcely ventured out of doors. She seemed to have undergone a shock from which it was difficult for her to recover; and in the night she frequently started with an exclamation of terror.

She affirmed that Alfredo Manzal, as she called him, would return again, and that now that he knew where she was, he would reappear when he was least expected, and that mischievous would surely follow his visit.

Comanche Dick endeavored to soothe and reassure her, but at the same time he felt a vague uneasiness himself, and resolved to be more watchful and vigilant than ever. He secretly hinted to the Rangers that there was danger in the air, and warned them to be doubly cautious.

At the same time he gave more attention to the signs in the distant horizon than he did to his sheep. There were several elevations which gave him an extended view of the surrounding prairie, and he frequented these more habitually than was his custom heretofore.

But day followed day, and nothing more was seen of the dreaded Manzal. For a long time Josepha would not venture beyond sight of the hacienda; but gradually her wonted spirits return to her, and under the affectionate care of her new-found parents, her songs and merry laugh were again heard ringing out upon the air.

In the hope of diverting her mind from the all-absorbing object which now and then would interpose itself, Dick proposed a trip to Santa Fe, the females being accompanied only by Black George and himself.

Josepha held back at first, but she was persuaded to join them, and the journey was undertaken and made to the New Mexican capital without any unpleasant incident occurring to mar their enjoyment.

But on the return, all the pleasure of the trip was blasted by a sight of the evil fate of Josepha's life.

It was just at sunset, and the party had encamped in a beautiful grove, when Black George remarked:

"That 'ere feller over yender seems to be very anxious about us."

"Whom do you mean?" inquired Dick, in considerable surprise.

"Why, yender," he replied, pointing toward a small eminence in the prairie.

"I don't see any one," was the reply.

"Skin me! ef he hain't sunk out of sight in the ground," added Dick, after a few moments' blank staring in the direction which he had indicated.

The ladies laughed, and the hunter was somewhat disconcerted for several moments, but he stoutly maintained his point, and a vague uneasiness came over Comanche Dick, who could not believe that such a cool-headed fellow could make such an inexplicable blunder.

"We will soon see," said he, remounting his animal. "You wait here, with the ladies, while I take a look for myself."

The next moment, he was galloping toward the point indicated, while his friends watched his motions with no little interest.

The hill or knoll was only a few hundred yards away, and Dick rode at a rapid gallop until he ascended the top. At that instant there was the sharp report of a rifle, and a suppressed shriek went up from the spectators, as they believed their leader was shot.

Black George, with a muttered execration, dashed toward him, but Dick instantly recovered himself, and impatiently waved him back.

"I'm all right! Keep by the women!"

At the very moment that Dick reached the top of the hill, the desperado Manzal was seen sitting motionless on his horse at a short distance. Without any warning, he raised his gun and fired, the bullet ripping up the sleeve of Dick's coat, and partly stunning him, so as to give the momentary impression that he was mortally wounded.

Before he could recover, and return the fire, the assassin was beyond his reach. The infuriated hunter urged his steed to the utmost, but he was soon left behind, and he could only return discomfited to his friends.

Dick attempted to conceal the truth from Josepha, but it was no use. She knew that it was Manzal, and she was more frightened than ever.

That night not one of the party slept. The two men kept watch, while the wife of Dick attempted to soothe her fair charge as best she could.

The females neither heard nor saw anything, nor did they observe anything in the actions of their protectors which looked as though they suspected danger.

But for all that they had seen something, which increased the apprehension of both.

The night was only moderately dark, there being a moon in the sky, and by the light of this, they detected a half-dozen horsemen, cautiously circling about over the prairie.

They seemed to be reconnoitering the position of the whites, as though meditating an attack; but, after lingering in the vicinity for over an hour, they moved away, and were not seen again.

Among these lurking visitors, Dick fancied he recognized the villain who had fired at him, but he was not certain of his identity, although, had it not been through fear of alarming Josepha, he would have sent a bullet through the suspected individual.

When morning came, nothing was to be seen of their enemies, and the party resumed their journey homeward, reaching it without any further adventure.

It was a long time before Josepha recovered from this second fright, and, in fact, she did not recover at all before the great blow of all came.

And it came in this wise.

CHAPTER III.

THE NIGHT ATTACK.

COMANCHE DICK at one time hoped to build his hacienda of stone, as a protection against fire, that most dreaded weapon of the red-men; but even with the assistance of his willing friends, it was found impossible, and he was compelled to construct it of rough logs, which were dragged no little distance over the prairie.

As we have hinted in another place, it was made with some pretensions to an elegant residence, he having gradually added to it, year by year, until it was composed of several buildings, which had quite an imposing appearance from a distance.

They were strongly and securely made, being vulnerable only to one enemy—fire, which may be said to include all the others; but, with proper watchfulness, Dick had hopes that this fiend might be kept at bay.

On the day on which our story opens, at the hour of noon, the shout of Long Eph was heard, and the leader and two rangers, who were in the house, looking out, saw him come to view, on the top of a swell in the prairie, and make several furious gestures with his long arms. At the same time the confusion and barking of several of the dogs, showed that something unusual was going on.

A moment later, the three were mounted, and dashing at full speed toward him. Long Eph waited only long enough to see that he was followed, when he thundered away in pursuit of the marauders.

When the rangers reached the spot which their friend had just left, they saw a party of three or four Apaches galloping leisurely away, and driving in front of them perhaps a thousand sheep.

It was not half so serious a matter as he imagined, and knowing that his men could "straighten" it, Comanche Dick turned about and galloped back to the house, so as not to leave the females defenseless.

The rangers did "straighten" matters most emphatically. In less than three miles the sheep were recovered, and turned back toward home, and, leaving them in charge of the dogs, that were sure to drive them right, the hunters continued the pursuit.

This proved a long one, and resulted in nothing. The Apaches could not be induced to turn and give battle, and they scarcely looked behind them, for hours, until they finally got safely away, when they uttered a taunting whoop, and soon after disappeared in the distance.

By this time the day was well advanced, and in no very pleasant mood the three set out on their return, and what they saw and what happened to them the reader has already learned.

After the departure of his men, Comanche Dick scarcely gave the matter another thought, for, as has been stated, he saw that it was only a trifling affair. He remained mostly in the house during the afternoon, and at sunset he took a look to satisfy himself that the sheep had returned, and were faithfully tended by the dogs, when he rejoined his family.

His wife and Josepha were in unusually good

spirits, laughing and chatting, and Dick was in a glow of health and genial good-nature, as he placed his foot within the door.

Just at this instant, a bark of one of the dogs attracted his notice, and turning around, he saw more than twenty Comanches riding down upon them!

As quick as lightning, Dick sprung into the door, fastened it, and with rifle in hand hurried aloft, calling to Josepha and his wife to follow him with their guns. They lost no time in doing so, and by the time they had obeyed him and were cautiously peering through the loopholes, the whole twenty Comanches had dismounted, and were screeching and yelling in front of the house.

The instant Dick could bring his gun to bear, he sent a bullet through one of the howling miscreants, and called out to his companions to do the same. Both fired the next moment, but in the semi-darkness did no more than wound their foes.

Thus warned, the Comanches immediately retired, a hundred yards or so, to a point where they were barely visible upon their horses, and began their favorite maneuvers, which in this case at least seemed to be pointless and unreasonable.

They circled clear around the building, riding at a rapid rate, and throwing themselves first on one side of their animals and then upon the other, and firing their guns from under the neck, belly, or over the back, or in whatever manner their fancy dictated.

Their bullets could be heard, as they rattled against the logs of the hacienda, and one of them accidentally passing through a loophole, narrowly missed slaying Comanche Dick himself. He felt the slight rush of the wind against his throat, as the messenger whizzed past, but no start or exclamation apprised those around him of what had happened.

He admonished them to keep their guns loaded, and to fire at every opportunity, as every shot, if effective, bettered their situation, and made their danger correspondingly less.

This random firing of the Indians was nothing more than mere bravado, and was understood by those within the hacienda. They remained cool and collected, firing whenever the opportunity presented, which, it may be said, was quite infrequent.

If the three rangers had only returned about this time, it would have been about the best thing that could have happened, but, unfortunately, they were many miles away, and it looked as though the Comanches were going to have it all their own way.

By extreme watchfulness, Dick finally gained a shot, which not only killed a red-skin, but the horse upon which he was mounted, and raised a howl of fury from the others.

It will be remembered that the night was of inky blackness, and the circling Comanches soon became invisible, except when the flash of their guns gave a momentary glimpse of their location.

Shortly after it became so dark, the Indians ceased their circus-like riding, and gathered together for consultation. Dick suspected as much, although he had no means of being sure of what was really going on.

His great fear was that an effort would be made to burn the building, as every thing was so favorable for such an attempt. He passed around the upper part of the house, watchful and vigilant, and instructed his wife and Josepha to report to him the slightest unusual sound or sight that came to their ears or eyes.

Reaching an opening in the roof, which had been made for such cases of emergency, Dick thrust his head out and listened. All was as silent as the grave, and whatever the Comanches were doing, they were doing with the stealth and silence of phantoms.

He waited several moments, but his trained ear detected absolutely nothing. Then he gave the "signal of distress," made with a tremendous whoop, tremulous and ringing far out in the still night. This was intended for a call to his companions, and Dick knew, if it reached their ears, they would not lose a second in responding.

But unfortunately it was not heard by them.

Having done all that it was possible to do, in this way, Dick was preparing to descend, when his sharp ear caught a soft, rasping sound, as if made by a body drawing itself over the shelving roof.

One moment's listening, and the hunter was satisfied that by some means or other, one of the Comanches had made his way to the top of the roof, and was now crawling along, most probably in search of this very opening. From

the sound, he judged that his enemy was about a dozen feet distant.

As stealthily as the creeping panther, Comanche Dick drew himself through the opening, and began creeping toward the crouching Indian.

At that instant a point of light suddenly glowed through the darkness, and he saw at once that the Indian had a spark of fire in his hand, with which he was endeavoring to kindle a fire upon the roof.

The spark was so small that the red-skin placed his face down close to it, and carefully and softly blew the blaze. Thus fanned, his own face was partly revealed, and Dick saw his glowing eyeballs and dusky features, and he placed his head nearly on a level with the roof.

The work of kindling a fire in the solid wood of the roof was found more difficult than the Indian imagined, and he bent his face closer and blew the harder.

At this time Comanche Dick was creeping toward the unsuspecting red-skin, who had halted almost on the very edge of the roof, which was inclined at such an angle that it required no little care to prevent falling.

Dick's first intention was to grapple with the savage, and settle the matter with the knife; but the footing was so uncertain as to make it more than probable that he would be precipitated to the ground with his victim. So he changed his mind and drew his pistol.

As he raised the hammer, he endeavored to suppress the noise; but the click reached the ears of the Comanche, who instantly looked up. Whether he saw his enemy or not can only be conjectured; but, at the same instant, the weapon was discharged, and the savage rolled struggling to the ground below.

Dick hastily changed his position, for he feared the shots of those below, who would be guided by the flash of the pistol; but they were so unprepared for such a turn of affairs, that no shot was fired at him.

Thinking that there might be others on the roof, he made a complete circuit, and carefully examined every portion; but the Comanche who had been tumbled off was evidently the most daring of his fellows, for none of the others had as yet attempted the feat.

Some confusion followed the fall of the savage, but it lasted only a moment, when all was still again. Dick waited some minutes to see whether anything like it would be attempted, and then he descended through the opening, carefully closed it after him, and rejoined his friends below.

He found that nothing had been attempted during his absence, nor would they have known of what took place on the roof, had it not been for the report of the pistol.

From their peculiar situation, it was impossible to have a light in the room, as the exact location of the loopholes would have been betrayed thereby—so in moving around they were guided by their knowledge of the configuration of the room, and by the sense of sound.

"Where can the men be?" inquired Mrs. Hampton, the wife of Dick.

"Off on a hunt. I told them that they might take the day, or what was left of it, and I suppose they will hardly be back before morning."

"If they would only return now," cried Josepha, "they might rid us of this Manzal."

"What do you mean?" asked Dick, who understood very well what was meant by the remark.

"He is outside; I know it."

"How do you know it?"

"I heard him whoop awhile ago."

Dick laughed quite heartily.

"You must have quite sharp ears, for I didn't hear it."

"You heard it, but didn't notice it. You are not so well acquainted with his voice as I am."

"I hope you are mistaken, Josepha, but perhaps you are not."

Dick only hoped it; he did not believe it. He had suspected from the first that Manzal, the ruffianly persecutor of Josepha, was at the bottom of the whole business, and when the first spark of fire appeared on the roof, he prayed that it might be the villain himself; but he was too great a coward to venture upon anything that involved so much personal risk.

When the Comanches first appeared, he carefully scrutinized them, so far as he was able, under the expectation of recognizing his enemy.

But, if Manzal was present, he was so well disguised as an Indian that Dick was unable to identify him. Although he treated the assertion of Josepha with no little levity, yet he placed more faith in it than she suspected.

A half-hour of quiet followed, and then Dick concluded to make another tour of the roof, so

as to prevent any insidious approach from that direction. Cautioning his friends to be unremitting in their diligence, he left them for a short time.

Alas! he was too late! When he threw up the cover, or trap-door, he saw that one corner of the roof was in flames!

For an instant, Comanche Dick stood appalled at the sight. Then he dashed back again, shouting for water. By the time he returned, bearing a vessel with the precious element in his hand, the flames had passed beyond his control, and it was with despairing sullenness that he dashed it upon the fire.

Almost at the same moment, several rifles were heard to crack from the prairie below, and the zip-zipping of the bullets around his ears caused him to withdraw his head more suddenly than he had thrust it out.

"The 'hacienda' was doomed, and the hunter hurried to his friends below.

"It's all up!" he exclaimed; "the building is on fire, and we must leave."

"Hark! that is his voice!" exclaimed Josepha, with a gasp of terror.

Dick was not entirely unprepared for this turn of affairs. Hurrying through the lower portion of the house, he reached an opening—a sort of door—so arranged as not to be noticeable from the outside, through which he hoped to reach the rude sort of stables in which their horses were kept.

There was no time to lose, and without pausing even to glance outside, he drew aside the door.

"Now, Josepha, close to me, and *you* next," he said, hurriedly addressing his wife.

The next moment, all three were on the outside.

By this time the light of the burning building was so great that it was like midday without; but it was no time for hesitation, and the three hurried across the intervening space.

The distance to cross was perhaps a hundred yards. Fully one-half had been passed, when a shout went up. The Comanches had discovered them.

"Go ahead and get out the horses!" called out Dick, to his friends, while he turned at bay.

The two females lost not a second, and an instant later had dashed into the rude building.

But the Indians had been ahead of them. Not a horse was there.

CHAPTER IV.

A TIGER AT BAY.

COMANCHE DICK was now a fury incarnate. Driven at bay, he was a man whom a dozen of his fellow-creatures would have hesitated to attack!

The Indians could have shot him down, but they had no desire to do so. They knew him, and their intention was to take the whole party prisoners.

Throwing down his rifle, Dick drew his terrible knife, and circling it over his head, sprung aloft, and uttered a whoop of defiance. His blood was up, and he was ready to attack the whole party, if they lingered in attacking him.

The white heat of rage gleamed in his eyes, and woe to the man who came within reach of that terrible right arm!

The fellow had thrown himself across the path of those he loved, and while he lived none could pass him.

The Comanches numbered nearer thirty than twenty; they had dismounted, and they came on foot toward him; but, awed by the terrible maniac in his manner, they hesitated a moment.

"Come on, you dogs!" he called out, in their own tongue, "the white man fears you not. You are cowards! you are women! you stand like children! Why do you not prove yourselves warriors?"

And again he flashed the fearful weapon over his head.

There was no empty boast in this; Dick felt every word of it; it thrilled through his veins, and he prayed that they would wait no longer, for he felt that he could not!

There was something awful in his demeanor, as he braced himself for the onset of his enemies.

The Comanche is no coward, and three of the foremost advanced simultaneously to the attack.

As cool, and firm as the rock, stood the daring hunter, with his knife clutched, and his eyes darting lightning upon them.

The trio of red-skins came cautiously forward, with knives also drawn. When they were with-

in a half-dozen feet, Dick could wait no longer, but, like the crouching panther, he leaped toward them.

His movements were made with marvelous celerity and irresistible force. The lookers-on could not follow the lightning like circlings of that long right arm. There was a wild whoop and he was between the three, raging like a demon.

It was but an instant—the twinkling of an eye, and Comanche Dick sprung backward fully a dozen feet, flourishing the bowie over his head.

"Dogs and cowards, why do you stand idle? You are afraid! you are women!"

A wail of horror went up, as the red-skins saw that the three who had advanced to the attack lay doubled over each other, all dead, while their slayer seemed unharmed!

Great as was the odds, Comanche Dick would have held his own and come off conqueror, had he been able to control himself; but he now lost all reason, and became insane with his own consuming passion.

"Dogs!" he shrieked, "if you are afraid to come to me, I will go to you!"

And he sprung toward them. Instead of fleeing, as would have been natural under the circumstances, the Comanches scattered, so as to close around him.

The daring fellow made a leap at the nearest, but tripped over one of the dead bodies and fell. Ere he could rise, a half-dozen were upon him.

But what of that? He came up, like the lion bursting through the brambles, but his knife had dropped from his hand, and was held by another. Still he raged like Sampson, scattering his foes, by sheer strength, until he was clear again, and with his long black hair streaming about his shoulders, and his eyes glowing with an unearthly light, he swung his arms like piston-rods, and still defied them.

At this instant, a shriek was uttered by Josepha, who with her mother had emerged from the stable, in their vain searchings for their horses.

"What's the matter?" he fiercely demanded, turning toward them.

"The horses are gone," replied his wife.

"Then I will get you one!"

With which he dashed straight through the crowd toward the nearest animal. In vain they attempted to interpose. He leaped over them, and vaulting upon the back of the steed, which was without saddle, he wheeled it around toward the point where his two friends were cowering, and almost broke its ribs with the fury with which he struck his heels into its sides.

Even here there was a prospect of success, had not an unlooked-for obstacle occurred. The obstinate brute refused to budge a step, but reared on its hind feet, and madly shook its head.

Again Dick pounded its sides, but in vain, and still blindly furious, he dealt the brute a blow with his naked fist on the side of its head, which caused it to reel and totter to the ground.

"Lie there!" he muttered, springing to his feet and glaring at it. "Had I a knife, I would slit you to fragments!"

All this had transpired in an incredibly short space of time, but the Comanches had not remained passive spectators. At the instant the hunter vaulted upon the back of the horse, two of them had rushed forward and seized Josepha and her mother.

When Dick saw them struggling in the grasp of their captors, his whole soul was fired again, and he plunged toward them.

But quick as were his movements, he had not gone half the distance when a lasso settled over his neck and arms, and before he could stir, a second and a third closed around him like so many vise. Ere he could free himself, he was thrown violently upon the ground and overpowered.

Now they gathered around him with taunts, but all the time taking care to bind him tighter and tighter. They spat upon him, and called him dog and coward; and among the most violent, Dick recognized, for the first time, the villain Manzal.

The poltroon, painted and daubed like a Comanche, had taken good care to keep in the background until his foe was powerless. Had he done otherwise, he would have been the first victim, for Dick would have singled him out, and passed by all others, in order to reach him!

The two women were placed upon a mustang by themselves; Dick was placed helplessly in front of a savage upon another, and the party moved away, just as the conflagration of the hacienda was at its height.

When the Comanches had gone about a hun-

dred rods, they halted, consulted together a moment, and then the party separated.

Ten of them, having the hunter in charge, moved directly south; the remainder, with the females, went in a southeast direction.

It was the latter band which encountered Black George and his companions in returning. The particulars of the encounter we have given.

At this time the others were not more than a mile distant, and the firing of the guns was distinctly heard.

Panting, but motionless, Comanche Dick bided his time.

CHAPTER V. UNCLE EPH.

On that same evening, the burning hacienda was witnessed by another party upon the prairie.

This party numbered two individuals, and they halted in a clump of trees, secured their horses, and were sitting upon the ground smoking, after they had finished their supper upon cold meat.

The night was so dark that nothing but the burning tip of a cigar and the glowing embers in the bowl of a pipe could be seen, while the sound of each other's voices betrayed their precise position.

He who was smoking a pipe was Ephraim Hopkins, a tall, gaunt, and rather awkward-looking personage, who had made a compromise between a Yankee dress and a half-civilized one, giving himself such an odd appearance, that he could not fail to attract attention anywhere.

A tall, bell-crowned hat was brushed quite smooth with the sleeve of his coat, and the long, flapping coat was gathered at the waist by a fiery-red sash, into which was thrust a formidable bowie-knife—a weapon which at that day was quite popular all through Texas.

His yellow pants were thrust into his enormous boot-legs, and to each foot was fastened an enormous spur. His face was long and thin, smooth-shaven and peaked, while his queer-looking hat was set back on his head, in a manner which was calculated to add to the general ferocity of his appearance.

Ephraim Hopkins was in middle life, possessed a rather pleasing expression, although there was a shade of conceit in his manner and words at times, which had the opposite effect. He was the uncle of his companion, a young man who answered to the name of Walter Middleton.

The latter was prepossessing in every sense of the word. Regular features, dark-blue eyes, rather light, curling hair, and a face bronzed by exposure to a southern sun, with a comely form, graceful limbs and movements, a quiet self-possession of manner—such were the noticeable characteristics of the nephew of Ephraim Hopkins.

Both the men, as a matter of course, carried a rifle and pistol, and both were mounted on fine horses. They were direct from Galveston, after ascending the river as far as possible, having come overland direct to this place.

"And it's the infarnalist trip I ever undertook," exclaimed Hopkins, alluding to the journey completed up to this point.

"However, we have been quite fortunate, uncle," said the latter, in a cheery voice, as he puffed at his cigar. "Here we are, as near as I can calculate, within a few miles of the end of our journey, and we haven't received a scratch, or felt a moment's sickness."

"Yas, yas," the other hastened to rejoin, as he produced his handkerchief, and gave a blast of his nose upon it. "I trust I am grateful for all such mercies, but for all that, this 'ere country ain't the one I'd want to settle down in."

"Nor I either; we are unanimous on that point."

"What did you say this gentleman's name is?" suddenly inquired Hopkins, leaning forward, so as to make sure of catching the answer.

"Dick Hampton, or Comanche Dick, as he is more generally known in the West."

"And he lives out in these prairies, away up in New Mexico?"

"Yes; I understand he has spent several years here. Although he hates the Mexicans, perhaps even more than I do, yet he likes their territory well enough to make his home in it, and I doubt whether Santa Ana himself could drive him out."

"He must be a strange feller indeed; they say he left Missouri, where he had a good home, to jine the fight atween Texas and Mexico. And you think the gal is with him?"

"I am almost certain of it. I am certain!" added the young man more emphatically, as he

roused up. "Everything that I heard points that way; even the name corresponds."

"Who was it, naow, that told you?"

"A hunter who had passed through the country, and spent a night at the hacienda of Comanche Dick."

"I know all that—I've heard that before," Mr. Hopkins hastened to reply, "but what I mean to ask, is whether you knowed him—that is, had you ever seen him afore, and have you ever see'd him since?"

"No; I can't say that I have," was the somewhat hesitating response.

"That's the part of the matter that I don't exactly like, Walter," replied his uncle, in a rather patronizing manner. "You know that poor Richard says, that in the affairs of this world, men are not saved by faith, but by the want of it; mind, I don't say we have come on a wild-goose chase, but if we have, it won't be the greatest surprise of my life."

"It will be of mine," was the quiet reply of the young man, who would not allow his faith to be shaken.

"If I hadn't believed there were purty good grounds fur expectin' to find the gal, you wouldn't have catched me leaving Galveston for this outlandish part of the world. You know, when you cum hum this last summer, on my farm in Connecticut, you thort there was a good opening fur me in Galveston, in the way of selling my trinkets, and that's what brought me to Texas."

"So there is, uncle Eph, and when we get home again, you shall start at it, and you shall make your fortune before a gray hair comes in your head."

"So I hope—so I hope; and then," he pursued, the taking up thread where he had dropped it, "when you got back to Galveston, and found that this 'ere lady-love had been spirited away, you become like a crazy person, and couldn't sleep o' nights, till you had found out where she had gone a-wisiting, and then you starts after her, and then you hears she has been in Santa Fe, and back you comes, and then a hunter comes along and tells you that he had seen her at the hacienda of a man called *Comanche Dick*, and—wal, here we be."

"Do you regret it?" asked the young man, in a reproachful manner.

"Not in the least," the elder hastened to reply, his intonation showing that he had a strong affection for his friend. "There are few things that you could ask me to do, that I would refuse to do. You know that, Walter, as well as I do."

"Yes."

"I am only now seeking to prepare you for a disappointment. You are so near the destination you are seeking, and you are so confident, it will be hard for me to witness the discovery of a mistake upon your part."

"I appreciate your kindness, uncle—"

"Hello!" suddenly exclaimed Mr. Hopkins, springing to his feet, "yender is a row, I swwow to gracious!"

Off to the northwest, the light of the burning hacienda was just rising in the horizon. The glare, at such a time especially, was almost unearthly in its appearance, and the two men for a few minutes were silent.

"By gracious!" muttered Mr. Hopkins, beginning to show considerable nervousness, "ef the perarie is on fire, we've got to git out of this."

"It isn't the prairie," replied Walter, who, rather curiously, decided from the same standpoint as did Black George, "it doesn't spread enough, and it isn't approaching us."

A few minutes' observation confirmed the truth of Middleton's opinion, and the two men were more at ease than they had been before. They silently watched the conflagration, until after an hour or so it began gradually to grow dim, and then both were startled by the sound of fire-arms, sounding at comparatively a small distance.

"I tell *you*," said Hopkins, in an undertone, "matters begin to look a leetle pokerish. That 'ere fighting I'd rayther was a leetle further off."

"Keep still, and no harm can come to us."

"But daylight will be here one of these days, and what then?"

"Then will be time enough to think about it."

"You have a cooler way of taking things, Walter, than I have, that is, you have jist *now*, although you'll own it was a leetle different when you got back from Santa Fe, and found out that your Josephine, as you call her, was missing."

"That was enough to excite an ordinary man."

"So it was, so it was; but, let me ask, as it

don't do any hurt to talk, whether you put full faith in that 'ere hunter that you call Blifkins."

"I don't pin my faith to any man, but I see no reason to doubt what he told me. However, we shall know very soon whether he deceived me or not."

The two friends chatted and smoked until late in the night—until the lurid light in the northwest had died out, and all was blank darkness—until the fierce sounds of fight between the Comanches and hunters had ceased, and all was still.

Then they lay down to slumber, their faithful horses acting as sentinels, while no thought came to either that they had witnessed the burning of the hacienda of Comanche Dick, and that on the very threshold of happy success, they were to be met by the bitterest disappointment.

The night wore away, and just as the sun was coming up, both awoke. Remembering what they had seen and heard on the previous evening, Middleton took occasion to pass out of the grove and take a hasty survey of the surrounding prairie.

All was clear—not a glimpse of anything suspicious was to be seen, and they were left unmolested to pursue their journey as they saw fit.

Both had made themselves so thoroughly acquainted with the country through which they were passing, and young Middleton had received such minute directions as to the location of Comanche Dick's residence, that they had no hesitation in the course they were to take, and as soon as they could complete their simple arrangements, both were mounted and riding at a leisurely gallop over the prairie toward the northwest.

"I believe our route leads us toward the point where we saw the fire last night," remarked Middleton, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"It would be curious if it was the hacienda that we saw burning," replied his uncle, in the same indifferent manner.

"By George!" exclaimed the young man, his face blanching, "I shouldn't wonder if it were that very building! According to the best calculations I can make, it was on the very spot. Yes, now I feel sure of it."

"I guess you are right."

"Heavens! if it is so! Then I am a day too late; the Comanches have been here!" he added, in the very bitterness of despair.

"Hold on, not so fast, Walter; it may be all that, and again it may not."

"No; I am impressed that it was his place that was burned, and that—"

"I don't contradict that point; but, suppose it was. From all that I can l'arn about this Comanche Dick and his men, they are all able to take care of themselves. Else why did they select this 'ere part of the world for their habitation, where the reds can come down on him at any moment, when there be so many where there ain't a bit of danger, down nearer the settlements?"

This hopeful and certainly sensible view of the case served to revive the spirits of Walter, although there was in truth enough on his mind to drive away all the pleasant hopefulness which he had experienced up to this time.

A brisk ride of several miles, and they came in sight of the ruins of the hacienda, guided by a thin column of smoke that was faintly rising from the *debris*.

As Middleton goaded his horse to his best speed, Ephraim Hopkins came to a dead halt and adjusted his iron spectacles upon his nose.

"Why don't you come on? What's the matter?" impatiently demanded his companion, reining up and looking back at him.

"Walter, you be hardly yourself now; you are rash; don't you see that we are not the first ones at the ruins?"

For the first time Middleton observed some horsemen standing motionless near the scene of the fire, and apparently watching them with considerable interest.

"I hain't got as sharp eyes as you," added Mr. Hopkins, leaning forward in his saddle and earnestly peering through his glasses, "but I think them 'ere persons are Injins. Ef so, we hadn't better hurry so fast in *that* direction. How often I thank Heaven that we were sensible enough to get the two fastest horses in Galveston, fur ef we hadn't, we'd've been catched by the p'isin sarpints a dozen times afore this."

The young man paid little heed to the talk of his garrulous companion. He was intently scanning the suspicious personages, one of whom began gesticulating to him.

"No," he suddenly exclaimed, again striking his horse into a gallop, "they are white men. Come on!"

As Hopkins had also reached that conclusion

at about the same time, he followed hard after Walter, although he was unable to come up with him, until Middleton reined up in front of Long Eph, Black George and Jake Jaggleton.

The three hunters politely returned the greeting of the young man, and then waited for him to explain matters.

"I have never seen you before," said Walter, speaking with great earnestness, "but from what I have heard from others, I judge you to be the companions of a great hunter and Indian-fighter known as Comanche Dick. Am I right?"

"You know more about us, younker, than we do about you," replied Black George, who was quite interested in the new-comer.

"And is this his hacienda, or house?"

"It war," was the significant reply.

"And where is he?"

"That's more nor we can tell, but it looks powerful as though he war in the hands of the Comanche skunks just now."

"Was there a young lady living with his family, a young Spanish lady, by the name of Josepha Navarro?"

"That there war, younker."

"And where is she?" was the next question, asked with a soul-thrilling earnestness, which it would be impossible to depict.

"She and Dick's wife are in the hands of the same thieves, as near as I can judge."

"Oh, God! I feared as much."

And, overcome by his emotions, Walter Middleton would have fallen from his horse, had he not been caught by his uncle.

"Easy, Walter—easy, now! Perhaps they'll bring her back ag'in, if they find we're looking fur her."

CHAPTER VI. NOW FOR THE GAME!

As a matter of course, the rangers felt no little curiosity at the actions of the young man, who was so affected by the news of Josepha's abduction.

Still they remained respectfully silent until he had fully recovered himself, when Black George said:

"Younker, what mought be your name?"

Ephraim Hopkins, with a tact which did him credit, hastened to answer for his young friend.

"This gentleman is named Walter Middleton. Have you ever heard of him afore?"

"Can't say that I did."

"Well, he and the young lady in whom we are all so deeply interested, are engaged in marriage, and we have come all this way to gether, and you'll own it's rather hard for a feller in his boots to git here jist in time to find out what you've told us. You see, ef we'd only been a day sooner—"

"Never mind that," interrupted Middleton, who was sometimes impatient at the garrulity of his companion. "I would rather hear from these gentlemen now. I suppose you will rescue your leader?"

"Rescue him!" replied Long Eph; "he'd shoot the first man that tried to rescue *him*."

"Gracious!" exclaimed Hopkins, who did not understand the meaning of this declaration. "He must be a queer chap."

"Comanche Dick is able to take care of himself" said Black George with an air of pride. "He told us long ago that if he ever got into the varmints' hands, jist to let him alone, and ef he couldn't get out ag'in without help, he didn't want to. Dick has been there afore."

"But you sart'inly don't expect his wife and Josepha to do the same?" inquired Hopkins.

"No; we war jist gittin' ready to start on a tramp arter her, when we see'd you comin' up, and we waited to see what it meant."

"You will certainly allow us to accompany you?" asked Middleton with no little anxiety.

"Wal, I dunno," laughed Black George, as he turned his eyes to the ludicrous figure of Ephraim Hopkins. "I don't think you'll be much help to us. Fact of it is, we'll be a powerful sight better off without you than with you."

"There ain't two better hosses that ever left Texas," remarked the New Englander, slapping the neck of his own beast. "We've been chased by Injuns a half-dozen times since we started, an' we kin run ag'in, if we see any of 'em."

"We don't propose to do that 'ere kind of business," laughed Long Eph.

The hunters showed, in the words that followed, that they were unwilling to take these two men with them, when there was every prospect that their presence would be an injury instead of a benefit.

Young Middleton showed such an earnest desire to accompany them, that a compromise was

finally offered. The vast drove of sheep, which Comanche Dick owned, had not, rather singularly, been disturbed by the Indians, and they could be dimly discerned in the distance busily cropping the dry prairie-grass, and under the guardianship of dogs.

"Them 'ere animals need lookin' after," said Black George. "We want to leave a man to take care of 'em while we ar' off on our tramp. It'll be better to leave one of you than one of us, 'cause, you see, we're a leetle more used to knife-cuttin' and ha'r-liftin' than you be."

"What is your proposition?" asked Middleton, observing a smile on the face of the hunter.

"Let this 'ere long-coat stay and mind the sheep for a day or two while we are gone, and then we'll take you with us, and that's all we can do."

It was expected that the New Englander would offer a strong opposition to this; but, to the surprise of all, the proposal pleased him. The fact of the matter was, he was not particularly anxious to engage in any "Indian business." On the principle that lightning isn't apt to strike twice in the same place, he concluded that the ruins of the burned hacienda would be safer from the hated red-skins than any other spot he could select.

"Of course," said he, after a moment's deliberation, in order to conceal his anxiety, "it would be a durned sight pleasanter to go along with you and jine in slayin' the whole accursed race of Comanches and such creetur's; but I opine there is a vally'ble interest represented in them 'ere sheep, and ef I stay and purtect them, no doubt the owner will make it—ahem—all right with me. So, friends, I accept the proposal. Yes, I'll stay and take keer of 'em."

This unexpected acceptance settled matters to the satisfaction of all parties concerned, and everything was made ready for the start.

Mr. Hopkins made some inquiries as to what his precise duties were in the way of acting as a drover, and found that he had little to do, except to keep them from scattering, as they were sometimes inclined to do, and even this tendency as a rule was guarded against by the sagacious dogs.

The hacienda, although in ruins, was not entirely destroyed. A small shed or stone house which Comanche Dick had put up some time before, had not been touched by the flames, nor had the stable been disturbed.

These were insignificant buildings, which, however, the New Englander could turn to account at night, or in case a storm should come up. Occasionally this portion of New Mexico is swept by the terrible "norther" of Texas, in which case no human being could feel absolutely safe, without some covering to shelter him from its fury.

In case he should need something in the way of food, and was not inclined to go on a hunt for it, it was very easy to dispatch a sheep and dress him, and there was little fear but what he would do it.

Mr. Hopkins wished them all good speed upon their journey, and, turning the head of his animal toward the sheep, he cantered away at an easy gallop.

"That is what I call a powerful good 'rangement," remarked Jake Jaggleton, as soon as the man was fairly beyond ear-shot.

"Yes; I wouldn't 've had him along fur any thing. But, come, we are losing time."

With which Black George wheeled about and started off at a rapid gallop, the others immediately following him.

The prairie over which they journeyed, after they had passed some distance, was covered with a long dry grass upon which any animal except the sheep would have found it a hard matter to subsist. It was so dry, indeed, that a fire once started would have raged with great violence, and traveled until stopped by some stream of water, or by the "openings" or clear places which were occasionally encountered.

It is quite difficult to follow a trail over such a country, not only on account of the frequent passage of other animals, but owing to the dry, hard, cracked nature of the ground, the footprints are often so indistinct that the most experienced eye can detect them only with the greatest difficulty. There was imminent probability of the trail being lost altogether, in case the hunters allowed much time to elapse before beginning the pursuit, or should they fail to press it vigorously.

So they had every motive to hurry, and they did so. Taking the trail where it appeared close to the house, they followed it rapidly until they reached the point where the Comanches had separated. Here they halted for a few minutes.

Only a short period was needed to decide what they were to do. It was found that two of them, on the evening before, had unmistakably heard the cry of Josepha, as she was borne so swiftly away by her captors, so that no doubt could remain as to the direction she had taken. They were not hunting for Comanche Dick.

"It's likely they took both the women one way and him t'other," remarked Black George, as they were about to move on again.

"Then why didn't she yelp?" inquired Jake Jaggleton.

"How do you know but what she did?" replied Long Eph. "I ain't sart'in by no means but what I heerd her last night instead of the younker."

"They both have voices that sound a good 'eal alike," returned Jake, "'specially when they're singin', and when they try a yell we mought toss up for which war which."

"Come, come, don't let us wait," said Middleton, fidgeting uneasily in his saddle, and chafing at the delay.

"See yer, yonker; hey you taken this yer party under yer wing?" inquired Black George, with some show of sternness.

"No, no; I have no desire to obtrude my advice; but you must see how much valuable time we are losing."

"It's all right," returned the hunter with a grin. "I'm ruther pleased at your anxiousness to git forrid. I hope it'll continer arter we draw a bead on the thievingest skunks that ever run away with the best gal that ever lived."

The last words were jolted out of the hunter, as his horse was on the gallop again. No one but an experienced man would have suspected that he was following a trail; for a glance at his eyes would have shown that they were sweeping the broad prairie, while only now and then did they flit to the ground in front of him.

The mustangs of the hunters were fresh, and they traveled at a high rate of speed, seemingly enjoying the fresh morning air more than did their riders, whose thoughts were too much occupied with the serious task before them to be susceptible to any such influence. Every one of the party were smoking, and the regular puff, as they rose and sunk upon their steeds, suggested the thought that they were all propelled by steam.

The trail of the Comanches showed that they were proceeding at a rapid speed, they evidently expecting that they would be pursued. For fully five miles from the point of their encounter with the Rangers, the footprints of their horses led almost exactly in a southwest direction. A surveyor could not have marked out a line more mathematically exact.

But here there was a divergence at a sharp angle, and it proceeded due south, toward the regular hunting-grounds of the Comanches and Apaches.

"What I expected," muttered Black George, as he wheeled his horse's head to the right. "Ef we don't overhaul them skunks afore they git many miles in that direction, we're goin' to have the biggest job we ever undertook in the Comanche line."

"Why so?" inquired Middleton.

The hunter looked at him a moment before replying.

"You ain't traveled much in these parts?"

"Of course not," was the somewhat impatient reply. "If I had, I might be ex-pected to know something. If it is any trouble to you to give information, you will oblige me by not doing it."

Black George laughed. He liked this show of spirit.

"You'll do, younker; you ain't no ninny, that's sart'in. We're now goin' straight toward the reg'lar huntin'-grounds of the Apaches and Comanches, both of 'em the infarnalest set of thievers that ever wore red skins. Ef that's any difference, the Apaches are the worst, fur the principle with them is to kill a white man or woman that may fall into tha'r clutches, and to do it in the wu'st way—and I kin tell you they know how to torture a man. Long Eph that could tell you something 'bout that, 'cause he's been through the mill."

"Do you suppose it is the Apaches that have carried our friends away?"

"Not a bit of it," was the decided response; "we know 'em too well. The Comanches ain't so bad, fur they'll give a man some chance fur his life. They're the all-firedest folks to travel you ever see'd. I've seen a party of 'em as fur north as the Yellerstone."

"Then their hunting-grounds seem to be everywhere."

"Exactly; but tha'r regular place—tha'r home, whar they're as thick as hornets—is the

spot that we've turned our noses toward. Thar's whar they keep thar squaws and papooses, and thar's whar you may depend on finding 'em at all times; and thar too," said Black George, raising his finger in an emphatic manner, "is whar the Comanches won't run, but will stand and fight."

"Hallo! what's up?" exclaimed Jake, who was riding beside the two men.

The exclamation was caused by a sharp whistle from Long Eph, who was galloping about a rod in advance of the others, and whose horse instantly descended to a trot, then to a walk, and then stopped as did the rest.

Eph replied by pointing toward the south, and following the direction of his finger, a thin column of smoke was seen rising perpendicular in the air, and growing fainter and fainter toward the top, until it finally mingled with and was absorbed by the blue atmosphere.

"What does it mean?" inquired Middleton.

"It means deviltry," was the muttered reply of Black George. "Thar are red-skins thar, and thar's something goin' on that hadn't orter!"

As yet nothing could be seen except the thin, stationary column of vapor, but the hunters thundered toward it at the highest rate of speed to which their horses could be urged.

As the prairie rose on their sight, the suspicions of the hunters were confirmed. What appeared to be a dozen Indians, some mounted and some on the ground, could be seen gathered in a knot, while from the center ascended the fearfully suggestive column of smoke.

"They seem to have encamped early," was the remark of Middleton, put for the purpose of receiving information.

"They haven't encamped; they've got a prisoner thar, and they're burnin' him or her, as the case may be," replied Black George, his face of a ghastly paleness.

The young man almost fell from his horse in the excessive terror that thrilled through him at these words; but he pressed his lips firmly, steeled his heart with superhuman strength, and put his animal on a full run.

As the hunters drew near, the Comanches scattered; but they left behind them a poor, miserable wretch tied to a stake, his fearful shrieks rising on the air, as he was in his very death-struggles, tormented by these inhuman fiends.

"My God!" gasped Black George, "it's Comanche Dick!"

CHAPTER VII.

A LONG RUN.

A TERRIBLE scene was before the hunters!

There are few of our readers who have seen a man burned to death at the stake. Such as have can never forget the sight, and have no desire to witness it again.

No pen can depict the horror of the four men, as they galloped up to the stake, where the poor wretch had just ceased his struggles in death. To Walter Middleton there was a faint thrill of relief when it was announced that it was a man and not a woman who was thus impaled and tormented.

But the soul-horror of the young man was none the less, as he urged his horse to his utmost speed, and was a yard or two only in the rear of the others in reaching the spot.

Black George was the first; and before his mustang had halted, he sprung to the ground, dashed the burning grass and sticks aside, whiped out his knife, and cut the thongs which held the poor fellow prisoner. He then drew him away from the smoking, smoldering embers, and laid him tenderly on the prairie.

"My God! it's Dick!" gasped Long Eph, approaching and bending over the body.

"So it is!" returned Jake and George together, and the latter added, "that is his coat—what is left of it—and that piece of his pants around his waist are his. Poor feller! he fell into the wrong hands this time."

The man could only be recognized by his dress. His legs, to a short distance above the knees, had been scorched and burned until nothing but the blackened bones remained! Only here and there a shred of clothing was left, and the wonder was that the man had lived so long under such torment. Great, indeed, was his physical endurance.

The face and head were as black as ink—the smoke and fire having caused it—while the whole body presented such a sight as would make the strongest shrink, and which gave a most graphic picture of the inhuman ferocity of the Indians of the Southwest.

The three hunters were accustomed to the

most revolting scenes imaginable, but they had never witnessed anything that had affected them like this. The sight of their own proud leader, so daring and chivalrous, so utterly fearless—he whom they had left at the hacienda in such glowing spirits, only the day before; he who scorned to receive the help of his friends when overtaken by calamity—the sight of him, or rather of his remains, in this plight, was enough indeed to appall the stoutest heart among them.

"If that is the way they served *him*, what has been *her* fate?" asked Middleton, breaking the oppressive silence that rested upon all.

"The Lord only knows," was the answer of Black George, in the same suppressed voice. "Wal," he added, with a sigh, "it's something we've all got to come to, and Dick has gone a little sooner than we expected—that's all."

The hunter stooped down to raise the head of his fallen leader, when he started back, and a grim smile lit up his countenance.

"Wal, thar! they beat us *that* time!"

"Sart'ainly they did," replied Jake, who was rather disposed to resent this levity at such a time, "but what's the use of grinnin' at it?"

"You don't know what I am grinnin' at," returned Black George, looking sharply at him. "I kin tell you something that'll make you grin too."

Seeing that his words and manner were misunderstood, the hunter added, pointing to the prostrate body before them:

"That war a sharp trick of the skunks. That poor fellow thar ain't Comanche Dick!"

The three looked at him more curious than ever.

"It was a sharp trick, I say, in them, when they took all the clothes off of Dick, and put them on another chap, and put his on Dick, and then burned t'other feller, so we'd think it war our man."

"What reason could they have for doing such a thing?" inquired Middleton.

"None at all—only deviltry. They knew we'd be close behind 'em, and so they tried this yer trick. Likely they thought they'd skeer us out from going further, but likely as not they didn't think that either."

"How can you tell that it is not your leader, when the clothes are his?"

Black George turned the blackened face so as to show the profile. This, as a matter of course, was no help to the young man, who had never seen the famous hunter; but the others observed such a decided difference in the forehead and nose, as to confirm in their minds, at once, the declaration of their companion.

If the horrified grief of the hunters had been great, their relief was none the less at this detection of the trick of the Comanches. It proved that their leader was still alive and well, and that for some reason his captors had no wish to put him out of the way at present.

What they intended doing with him in the future could only be conjectured; but, clinging to the belief that he could take care of himself, the hunters determined to turn all their efforts toward the discovery of the females.

As the Comanche party moved away, they had been narrowly scanned by the hunters, who had satisfied themselves that neither Josepha Navarro nor the wife of their leader was among them. This might have brought matters to a standstill had the pursuers been less experienced men than they were; but neither of the three were deceived.

The smaller party which had the two captives in custody had gone on ahead, while the rest had lingered behind, to indulge in tormenting some poor prisoner that they had captured. This fact proved further that there had been a junction of the entire body, else it would have been impossible to exchange the clothing of Comanche Dick for those belong to another man.

It, therefore, looked more than probable that the three prisoners were now companions in captivity. It was rather curious that the place of junction of the Comanches was not noticed by the rangers, who were so quick to observe every thing; but had it occurred at a point after the discovery of the tormented prisoner, it will be readily understood how their eyes saw nothing but the sight ahead of them, and took no notice of the ground over which they were hastening.

There was nothing that could be done for the unfortunate victim of Comanche atrocity, so he was left to lie upon the open plain, to be rotted by the elements, a prey to ravenous animals and the foul birds of the air.

Once more the heads of the mustangs were turned toward the southwest, and they were put to the highest speed that was safe in animals of

which so much was expected, and that had already undergone such hardships.

During the few minutes that had passed while the hunters were dismounted, the red-skins had improved their time to the utmost. It cannot be said that the red-skins were fleeing out of fear of their pursuers, but they were doing so simply as a matter of policy. The time would probably soon come for them to turn and strike.

Not one of the whites, who were journeying in such haste, had tasted a mouthful since the preceding day, and their animals had undergone considerable fatigue; but both man and beast were capable of enduring a great deal more, and the former had no thought of hunger.

A distance of several miles separated the pursuer and pursued; and, as both were well mounted, the chase bid fair to be a long one, in case a "dead run" was to be made.

The plain became so dry and parched as they advanced, that the Comanche mustangs raised a great cloud of dust, which at times effectually shut them from sight of those behind them.

Up to the hour of noon, the day continued clear and sunshiny, but at that time the experienced trappers saw the omens of a coming storm. They were faint at first, unaccompanied by thunder, or any sudden darkness of the firmament, but they were nevertheless decided and unmistakable.

"It won't come till fur inter the night," said Jake Jaggleton, who was the weather prophet of the party, as he turned on his horse so as to sweep the entire horizon, "but it's comin', fur all that, and it'll be what I call a reg'lar ringtailed snorter."

"Where then will be the trail?" asked Middleton, whose whole interest centered upon the object of their pursuit.

"It'll be whar it is now," replied Black George. "Yer don't s'pose we're follerin' of it now, do yer?"

"I certainly did."

"Then you're powerfully mistook, that's all. The trail ain't good fur nothin' any longer, and I've been thinkin' fur the last half-hour that we war on a reg'lar wild-goose-chase arter all."

"You have no idea of giving it up?" demanded the young man, in alarm. "In that case, I shall continue it alone. No, I cannot believe it."

"Should think it would hurt your stummick a little to swaller that," was the contemptuous reply of the hunter. "You 'pear to have some good p'ints about you, youker, but you've got one thunderin' bad one, of thinkin' you know what I think, when you don't know nothin'."

"I beg pardon; but my feelings are so worked up that I cannot help being hasty at times."

"What I meant," continued Black George, "is that thar ain't much to be gained by makin' a dead chase of it in this style. It's 'bout time we guv it up and fell back on *original principles*."

Middleton was certainly far from being enlightened by this declaration, and he waited for his friend to declare himself more explicitly.

"You see the reds know we're arter 'em, and all they've got to do is to keep out of our way. What I meant war, that it's time we begun to meet thar tricks with tricks, an' fight 'em on that line."

"Ah! I see—by means of stratagem?"

"That's the ijee. I mought take the time to explain it, but my advice is fur yer to wait and see."

As it was impossible for Middleton to do much of anything else, he thought the advice was at least unnecessary.

Black George now fell back somewhat, and consulted his friends, their horses almost sinking to a walk while they did so, during which young Middleton remained beyond ear-shot, and gained as good a view as was possible of the Indian party ahead.

Now and then, through the clouds of dust which marked their progress, he could catch a glimpse of the gaudily-dressed horsemen, but could see nothing that bore any resemblance to the one object he was seeking.

As near as he could judge, the progress of each party was about the same, so that there was good cause for the belief that the chase would be a long one indeed, if continued in this manner.

Black George's council with his friends lasted but a few minutes, when he gave a sharp whistle as a signal for the young man to turn round. The latter did so, and saw that they had made a decided change in the direction they were pursuing—turning abruptly to the left.

He saw at once that a change of tactics was decided upon, but he forbore questioning, waiting for events to explain themselves.

But they had gone but a mile or so, when he

observed that they were aiming toward a high prominence in the prairie—a sort of hill, which rose almost like a cone to the height of a hundred feet.

Its seemingly smooth, even surface, and its regular ascent and descent, gave it the appearance of an artificial construction—one of those singular monuments, perhaps, which are found here and there scattered over our entire continent, although less seldom met with in the Southwest than further North.

As they continued their advance at an easy gallop, the Comanches did not change their course. Further and further they receded into the distance, until only a faint cloud of dust marked their appearance, and finally this vanished, and the hunters were with themselves, and with no one else in sight.

The eminence, which seemed only a short distance away proved further than Middleton anticipated, and nearly an hour was spent before the party reined up at the base.

"Here we make a short halt," said Black George, springing off his mustang. "Git off yer hoss and give him a little rest, fur he needs it."

Rather curiously, this mound-like eminence appeared to contain an unusual quantity of moisture, as the grass at the base was green and succulent, and the animals made a rich feast upon it. Black George and Long Eph immediately began clambering up the side of the mound, which was, in fact, so precipitous that it was a work of no small difficulty; but they persevered, and, after considerable labor, placed themselves on the summit, whose breadth was about sufficient for a half-dozen men to stand side by side.

Their principal, and, in fact, their only object in making such haste to this spot, was that they might "take an observation," and they now proceeded to do this with a carefulness which showed that momentous results depended upon the knowledge they thus expected to obtain.

The result was what they had expected, and was another confirmation of the sagacity of these men of the plains. Looking to the southwest, they saw distinctly the party which had vanished from their sight a short time before.

But beyond these, and just in the bar of the horizon, was a *second party*, and it was these Comanches that were journeying in a somewhat different course, *who held the three prisoners, and who had thrown out those in the rear for the purpose of misleading their pursuers.*

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRANGER AT THE FEAST.

ALL of us have our failings and besetting weakness, and Ephraim Hopkins, who was a bachelor from New England, was not exempt from them.

His particular failing was the uncomfortable one of always being hungry. He had frequently declared he never saw the time when he was really "full," and when he would not have felt better by taking a little more. The reason why he gave over his gastronomic efforts when in civilized regions, was simply out of fear of attracting wonder and remark.

When he got beyond the settlements in northern Texas, with his nephew, Walter Middleton, he had more opportunity to gratify this longing, and he performed some feats in the way of eating, which startled even his relative. Hopkins was aware of it, and he, therefore, ceased his indulgence at the very moment when his appetite was leading him on to greater exploits.

The truth of the matter was, that, when the proposal was made for him to remain and take care of the sheep, he accepted it not only through his unwillingness to meet the red-skins, but also because he had an almost irresistible longing to provide himself with a breakfast.

Hopkins waited until the hunters were out of sight, by which time he was in the vicinity of the immense sheep-drove, and then he exclaimed:

"If I ever was sart'in of one thing, it is that I'm hungry, and I ain't such a fool as to stay hungry, when there's such a quantity of lamb and mutton about me, not if Ephraim Hopkins knows himself. The choicest lamb here is ordained to grace my table."

Even while he was muttering this soliloquy, his keen eye was searching for some dainty animal among the myriads around him.

"Hello! there's just the critter!"

And raising his gun to his shoulder, he sent the bullet crashing through the head of the little

innocent lamb," which, with a bleat of agony, turned over on the grass and died.

In a twinkling Hopkins was off his horse, had whipped out his hunting-knife, and had it at the throat of the creature. He was used to this kind of business, and he handled his knife with a dexterity that showed he was a master of the art.

In a trice the fleecy skin was removed, and the drover's mouth watered as he contemplated the juicy joints which were coming into shape under his manipulations. The rest of the drove appeared so accustomed to the presence of man, that they continued grazing in an indifferent manner as usual.

The drover's horse also stood by, so tired and exhausted from his hard drive, that he needed no attention, and in fact received none.

"Jimini! ain't that splendid chops! *Heavens!*!"

Had the Lightning-Express train, going sixty miles an hour, on a down-grade, collided with Ephraim Hopkins, he could not have been more astonished than he was. As he was bent over in a stooping position, something struck him in the rear with such terrific violence that his hat flew high in air, while he himself was hurled fully a dozen feet forward, performing a complete somerset in his progress!

As soon as he could recover himself, he looked about him, and saw that if the majority of the animals around him were unconcerned at his motions, there certainly was one enormous ram that was not, for he stood over the slaughtered remains of the lamb, with his head partly lowered, his great twisted horns pointed threateningly toward him, as though debating whether to repeat his charge or not.

"Thunder! it was you, was it?" muttered Ephraim, rubbing his injured parts. "I didn't think I was going to offend you. Confound you! I'll soon settle *your hash!*"

And he arose to pick up his rifle to give the warlike Aries his quietus; but, unfortunately, the gun was not only unloaded; but it lay at the very feet of the infuriated animal.

The moment the Yankee rose to his feet, the ram took it as a challenge to a renewal of the combat, and, lowering his head, he made a rush at him the second time.

"Good heavens! what is going to become of me?" exclaimed the thoroughly terrified man, looking about him for some avenue of escape. But, seeing none, he adopted the rather original expedient of making a leap up in the air, so as to allow the furious brute to pass under him.

A very good idea, but Hopkins didn't jump high enough to clear the sheep entirely, and when he came down, he landed astride of it, with his back toward the head of the ram; but the momentum of the latter carried him so powerfully forward that his rider remained on his back but a moment, and then fell again to the ground.

This mishap, however, placed Hopkins between his enemy and his gun, and he improved his advantage to the utmost. Springing instantly to his feet, he darted forward, and had caught up the weapon before the ram could return to the charge.

Had it only been loaded, all would have been well. Not until the Yankee had brought it to his shoulder twice, and attempted to fire that many times, did he recollect the truth, and then it was too late to do anything, as the ram was bearing down upon him again.

Fairly vanquished, Hopkins now turned and ran with might and main. The build of the New Englander was well suited to pedestrianism, and, in the common parlance of the West, he did some "tall walking," his long coat-tails streaming far out in the wind, and his long hair, unconfined by his hat, did the same.

But after all, his pursuer gained steadily upon him, and, as a *dernier resort*, Hopkins turned for his horse, that was quietly grazing, a hundred yards or so away; but, every animal seemed in league against him, and the horse, frightened by the impetuous approach of his master, raised his head, cocked up his ears, gave a faint neigh, and then trotted away.

"Blast your old hide!" yelled the exasperated fugitive, "if I had my gun loaded, I'd shoot you. Whoa, darn you!"

The horse seemed in doubt what to do, but he finally held up enough for the toiling and panting Hopkins to reach him, just as the ram was again in his rear.

But he avoided the brute by leaping behind his horse. The ram, having no special ill-will against the horse, fetched up, and glared about him to decide upon the next move for the annihilation of his foe.

This was the golden moment for Hopkins, and

catching his horse by the bridle, he swung himself upon his back in a twinkling, leaving the ram master of the field for the time being.

Revenge is sweet, and the pleasure of reloading his piece, and sending a bullet through the skull of the quadruped, was one of the greatest that the New Englander had ever experienced.

"There! consarn you!" he exclaimed, as he cautiously descended to the ground again. "You're done for, sart'in. You've larned to leave hungry folks alone, when they're peaceably gitting of their dinners. My gracious! ef he hasn't run over my hat!"

He hurried away to where his hat was still lying, it having a rather suspiciously crumpled appearance from where he stood. As he feared, when he came to pick it up, he found that by some means the ram had driven one of his hoofs through it, thoroughly "ventilating" that useful piece of head furniture.

"Too darned bad," muttered Hopkins, as he carefully readjusted it to his head again. "That cost four dollars to hum, and I calc'lated on making that much on it, in a trade here in Galveston, but that 'ere spec' is now out of the question. Wonder if there's any more rams about?"

He looked carefully around, but seeing none of the flock that appeared to have an eye upon him, he again approached his almost prepared dinner, his mouth watering at the luscious feast before him.

"Now, I think it's about time I had something to eat. I do believe if I wait much longer I shall perish."

As there was little or no opportunity to cook his meal there, he shouldered his meat and be-took himself toward the hacienda, where there still remained enough smoldering embers to have cooked a hundred sheep.

Several of the dogs scanned the new drover as though they were not exactly satisfied with his movements, and did not understand who he was, but they showed no disposition to molest him, and he reached the still smoking ruins without being disturbed by them.

The coast was now clear, and Hopkins lost no time in going to work. By stirring and drawing aside, he found a quantity of live coals, upon which he spread several pounds of the choicest part of the lamb. The crisp, juicy meat soon sent up an appetizing odor that was enough to set a hungry man wild.

"What a fool I'd been to 've gone off with Walter and them fellers, and like enough I'd been hungry all day."

By this time a portion of the lamb was done "rare," and Hopkins prepared to "throw himself outside" of it. The piece was quite small, not more than a pound in weight, and the gusto with which he devoured this tid-bit, and the luscious enjoyment with which he swallowed mouthful after mouthful was a sight to behold.

The mill fairly started, the gormandizer kept it going by throwing piece after piece upon the coals, and devouring them as they became cooked. This was continued for perhaps fifteen minutes, when all at once—

"I say, old hoss, no objections, I s'pose, to a feller takin' a bit with yer?"

Ephraim Hopkins's shock was fully equal to that which he received from the ram. He dropped the piece of meat which he was in the act of raising to his mouth, and springing fully two feet from the ground, glared around to see the owner of the fearful voice, which had been like the shock of an electric battery to him.

One glance at the individual satisfied the New Englander that he was confronted by one of the most terrible desperadoes of the Southwest—that country which for thirty years seems to have been the chosen home of outlaws and criminals.

He was dressed partly as an Indian, and his face was smeared with paint, which had been somewhat rubbed off, making his countenance ten times more hideous than it otherwise would have been, and Heaven knows that nature had stamped it badly enough. He had black eyes, with long, black hair streaming down his back, a broken nose, and a mouth which looked as if, when an infant, he had been hung up on a peg by it. He was tall and muscular, and had every appearance of being an ugly customer when driven into a corner.

He had walked up silently behind the drover, who suspected nothing of his approach until apprised by his rough salutation. He stood with his rifle in hand, having left his horse a short distance away, secured near the stables that had escaped the fire. At the girdle around his waist gleamed his large bowie-knife, and in short he was a desperado, armed to the teeth.

Hopkins stood staring at him a few moments

so astounded that he could neither move nor speak.

"I say, old boss, what's the matter?" demanded the stranger, taking a step or two nearer.

"Nothing—nothing—only I'm a little hungry," stammered out the New Englander, unconscious really of what he was saying.

"Hungry?" repeated the other, with a snorting laugh. "I should think you'd eat 'nough to kill a half-dozen or' nary critters. I say, be you gwine to give this yer catamount a bite of that stuff, or have I got to help myself?"

"Sart'inly, sart'inly," returned Hopkins who was beginning to regain his self-possession. "Scuse me, but you come down so rather sudint like, that I forgot my manners. You shall have the best I can give you."

The truth of it was, the gourmand was pretty well shaken up and frightened, and he was desirous of conciliating the stranger, who, he doubted not, would slaughter him, should he give him any cause for offense.

Whoever the visitor was, he certainly made himself at home. Glancing around as if to make sure that they were alone, he threw himself upon the ground, and produced a short black pipe, which he began smoking, while his host bestowed every care upon the preparation of his dinner.

"What's yer name?" inquired the stranger, as he lazily puffed his pipe.

"It is Ephraim Hopkins," was the ready response of the New Englander. "I'm from the State of Connecticut, clus to the Massachusetts line—not fur from the Connecticut River—my daddy's farm adjines Deacon Jones, and if you ever come that way, you must make a call on me. Arter you leave Hartford, you want to take the—"

And he was proceeding to give minute directions as to the manner in which his New England residence was most easily reached, when the stranger interrupted him somewhat impatiently.

"Never mind that now. Whar yer come from last?"

"Galveston, Texas."

"Did yer come alone?"

"Oh, no; my nephew, a very nice young man, came with me."

"What's his name?"

"Walter Middleton. A very good fellow he is, although I must say, I think he's ruther over ventur'some at times, and I'm afeard he's got into trouble now—Hope I haven't offended you."

Hopkins suddenly paused, startled by the fearful expression which he saw flit over the demon-like face; but it lasted only for a moment.

"Never mind; it wa'n't nothin'," said he; "sometimes I feel like chokin', but it don't last long."

"I only wish it lasted longer," was the thought of the Yankee, which he would not have dared to utter for the world.

"Whar is this nice young nephew of yours?"

"That would be hard to tell; he's gone; hain't you heard the news?" abruptly asked Hopkins.

"What do you mean?"

"Why this here."

And he emphasized his reply, by pointing to the ruins around him. "Hain't you heard how that took place?"

"Struck by lightning, I s'pose."

"Struck by Injuns, you'd better say. There was a party of them red-skins that they call Comanches, that came down here last night, set fire to this here building, or *haciendy*, that was called, burned it down, and run off with the owner—"

"Who's he?"

"Comanche Dick they called him, but I never see'd him, and they run off with him."

"Did they take anybody else?"

"Yes; that ain't the worst of it—they tuk his wife, and a little purty Spanish sort of a girl, that was called Josepha Navarro—and right there I've got something to tell you," added Hopkins, with a burst of confidence.

"I'd like to hear it," returned the stranger, who showed his interest by not noticing the steak that was now ready for him.

"That is the gal that we're after—that is, me and my nephew, and we've come all the way from Galveston after her."

"What did yer come after her fur?"

"She and my nephew was engaged to be married, and he came back to Galveston to marry her, and when he got there he found that she was gone to Santa Fe, so he l'arned, and we went all the way there after her, only to find when we got there, that she was living out here,

with a feller they called Comanche Dick. Wasn't that a purty pickle fur us?"

"Yes, ruther," grunted the stranger.

"So we had nothing to do, but to turn back arter her, for, you know when a feller gits into love, he'll do any thing. I tried to persuade him to give her up, but it wa'n't no use, and so as I'm a sort of a guardian over him, I had to go along with him. Well, we got a little off the track, and afore we knowed it I s'pose we was across the Texas line, but we fetched around arter a while, and got here at last."

"When did you git here?"

"This morning, just when it was too late."

"Where is yer nephew now?"

"He went off with three hunters to try and git the gal from the Injins. It's my opin'on they'll have a purty hard chase afore they catch 'em, for they do tell me them Comanches have good horses and know how to ride 'em. Do you know any thing about 'em yourself?"

"I've heerd as much. Why didn't you go with 'em?"

"You see there's a good lot of sheep out here, and there must some one stay to watch 'em, and they axed me to do it."

There was silence now for a few minutes, and then the stranger, who still smoked his black pipe, said:

"Ye'r' sure thar wa'n't no one but Injins inter this business?"

"Of course not; but I forgot. Walter, that's my nephew, always had his 'spicion of a white man, that he said was ten times worse than the Injins himself; and from what I can hear, I agree with him."

"What was his name?"

"Manzal, I believe is what they call him. Do you know him?"

"Can't say that I do, but I've heerd his name I think. What about him? What had he to do with it?"

"Walter allers said that this 'ere white man that they call Manzal was at the bottom of the trouble—or was one of them that was at the bottom, fur I b'lieve there was another man besides him, and Walter says he never will be satisfied till he shoots this villain, and you can't blame him much either; for, if a man should steal your sweetheart or mine, I think we'd feel a durned sight like him. What do you think about it now?"

"Can't say, 'cause I hain't got no sweetheart."

"Wal, I have, and I don't want no man to come shoveling around her, for if he does, he will shovel himself into trouble."

"So they've gone after the gal, have they?"

"That's just what they've done exactly."

"When do they expect to get back?"

"They thought to-morrer; but, my gracious, I shall feel glad if I see 'em three days from now!"

"And you are here to watch the sheep?"

"Yes; they said they was afraid some of the Injins might come back and stampede 'em, and they left me here to prevent it."

For the first time, a sort of smile crossed the horrible-looking face of the stranger, and leering at the Yankee a moment, he asked:

"S'posen a half-dozen Comanches come tearin' down on you, shoutin' and yellin', what would you do?"

"Wal, you see I've got a good horse out there, and I'd just bounce onto his back and you'd see some tall getting out of these parts. It would take a durned smart Comanche to ketch me, after I got fairly started."

The stranger laughed harder than ever.

"You're just the man; s'pose thar war only two Injins, or, fur that matter, only one—what would you do?"

Hopkins pondered awhile before answering.

"Well, I think I'd make a run fur it."

"S'pose thar was one white man—like *me*, say? S'pose that Manzal, that you've been talkin' 'bout, should 'pear afore yer?"

"Oh, I'd shoot him!" was the unhesitating reply.

"Wal, stranger, that same Manzal is here afore yer!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE COMANCHES.

WHEN the wife of Comanche Dick and Josepha Navarro fell into the hands of the Comanches, despite their terrible position, each had enough presence of mind to see that nothing could be gained by resistance, and they remained quiescent for the time being.

They were witnesses of the terrific encounter between Dick and his captors, and to them it was like the vision of some horrible dream. No word escaped either during its continuance, and

they hardly realized what was going on until the entire party had left the scene of the conflagration.

As we have already stated, the Indians had gone scarcely a hundred yards when they halted and separated. The object of this was simply to baffle the pursuit that they knew would be begun. The smaller party carried the females with them, while the other had the desperate hunter in charge.

Both the females had a fine Indian blanket wrapped around them, and they were taken on separate horses, each one being held on the back of the animal in front of a brawny red-skin, and both rendered perfectly powerless, so far as any disposition to help themselves was concerned.

Comanche Dick was bound and rebound again, from his arms down to his knees, so that he was little more than a log of wood in the hands of his captors. It was rather curious that while they were securing him in this manner, he uttered never a word, but acted like a man who had given over all hope.

The truth was that his frame had undergone such a prodigious amount of exertion that a reaction was upon him. Like the famed *Gymnotus*, that expends its electric power in one shock, he needed a little rest to recuperate, and to regain the marvelous strength that still slumbered in his iron muscles.

Although, for a time, he was within a dozen feet of his wife and child—as he called Navarro—yet he did not offer to exchange a syllable with either. He was in one of his "spells," and they both understood him well enough to make no communication with him at such a time.

By and by he would come out of this strange state, and it would be like the rousing of the sleeping lion. If his first struggle was terrible, this would be tenfold more so, and neither of the females wished to witness it. So the party journeyed in silence, which was not broken when Dick was carried in one direction and the females in another.

Josephina Navarro came within a hair's breadth of being killed by her own friends. When her party encountered the rangers in the grass, the meeting was so sudden that the red-skins were not given the opportunity of arranging their forces and maneuvering as they would have preferred to do, and the shot fired by Black George himself killed the Indian who had charge of Josepha, the bullet grazing her neck in its passage.

The savage rolled to the ground, partly dragging her with him, but she speedily recovered herself, and was about to make a run for the lines of her friends, when she was seized by another, and placed beyond reach of the whistling bullets.

The Comanches, it will be remembered, preferred to move on rather than engage in the fight, and in a shorter time than might have been expected, they were under way again.

It may as well be stated, at this point, that the destination of the entire party of Comanches was one of their towns, something over a hundred miles to the south. Could they once succeed in reaching that point, they might consider their captives secure, but not until then was there any certainty of their not being wrested from them.

If the females were once placed in the Comanche village, nothing short of a cavalry charge could rescue them, and the nature of the case forbade that anything of the kind could be looked for.

What the purposes of the Indian were regarding these captives can only be conjectured. There are at this time hundreds of prisoners among the Apaches and Comanches of the Southwest, who have been there for years, and many of whom will probably spend their lives there.

It is likely that the Comanches held no well-defined intentions regarding the females. They now wished to place them beyond all hope of escape, and for that reason they were seeking to reach their town before Dick's rangers could interfere with them.

There can be little doubt that death was intended for the leader of these hunters. He was so well known, and the knowledge of his prowess was so extended, that his captors had the natural anxiety to display their own bravery to their companions, and so, if possible, they were still more anxious to get him into their village as speedily as might be.

After getting him there, and after showing him, like a captured tiger, to their friends, there can be no doubt of what would have followed. Comanche Dick would die by the hands of his enemies, who would give him such a taking off as only these red-skins of the Southwest can

give, and a description of which would appall the stoutest heart.

For an hour or two after the separation of the Indian parties, not a word was exchanged between the captives of Dick; but at the end of that time, he heard a voice which caused him to prick his ears and listen.

It came from the man nearest him, and he raised his head so far as it was possible to do so, and stared intently toward him; but the extreme darkness forbade him distinguishing any features—but he listened.

It was some time before the horseman spoke again, and when he did so it was with an extremely cautious voice; but the sharp ears of Dick heard it, and he recognized in it the voice of a white man.

"Just what I thought," he reflected; "it's that Manzal, and he is at the bottom of this business. If I were only free for a moment; but by-and-by my time will come."

Still the captive made no effort to free himself; his "spell" had not passed entirely off.

In a few moments he heard the voice.

"I say, you!" called out Dick, turning his head toward the one who had spoken.

But no reply was made until he had repeated the address several times, and then a gruff voice demanded:

"Keep yer slack shet. What do you want?"

"I only wanted to make sure that it was you, Alfredo Manzal, who was so near me. That's all for the present."

This shot told. Manzal, with good reason, feared this man more than any man living, and he had little desire to remain anywhere within possible reach of him. He had been urging the Comanches to put him out of the way, and they only refused because they wished to put him on exhibition before doing so.

The unmistakable threat conveyed in the reply of Dick was fully understood by Manzal, and it sent a thrill of terror through him. As he was powerless to inflict any injury on the captive, he determined to put himself out of a position where it was possible to receive any hurt at his hands. After a few minutes, he acquainted the Comanches with the necessity of leaving them for a time, but pledging himself to be "in at the death."

And in the course of a half-hour, he quietly withdrew from the party and took a different course over the prairie, and when daylight dawned, he was beyond their sight.

Several hours later he appeared at the ruins of the hacienda as Ephraim Hopkins was preparing his dinner, and there, for a short time, we must leave the two in rather a critical situation as concerns at least the latter individual.

The Comanches reunited at daybreak, and for the next few miles proceeded in company. By this time Dick had begun to arouse himself, and he exchanged looks with his friends, but no words passed between them. The extraordinary being was still his own master, and he preferred to wait the "good time" which he believed would soon come.

An occurrence now took place, so terrible in its character that we can not give the particulars of it, and only refer to it in order that our readers may have an understanding of what followed.

The sun was only a short distance above the horizon, when they descried a solitary hunter riding toward them. From some unaccountable cause, he turned neither to the right nor left, but came directly onward until within a few rods, when a sense of his own peril seemed to come over him for the first time, and he attempted to flee.

But it was too late. Several shots were fired, himself wounded and his horse killed. As a matter of course, he was instantly captured. Finding resistance useless, he began pleading in the most abject manner with his captors. Comanche Dick listened until sickened at the sight, when he sternly called out:

"Shut up your mouth; if you're a baby, it won't do any good to let folks see it."

The poor fellow seemed ashamed at his timidity, and said no more. When the clothes upon Comanche Dick were exchanged for those upon the other prisoner, no objection was made. The latter did not understand what it meant, but the former did, and he saw an opportunity for gaining a greater freedom of his limbs.

When the barter of garments was made, the majority of the party moved on, taking the three captives with them, while a few remained behind to indulge in the luxury of tormenting their other captive.

Their preparations were so elaborate that they came near being disappointed of their enjoyment by the appearance of the rangers in the

distance. Suspecting who they were, the redskins remounted and fled, taking quite a different direction from the party in advance of them, so as to mislead the hunters, whose errand was well understood.

For a time this stratagem succeeded, but the keenness of Black George and his companions began to suspect the artifice, although it was in the power of the Indians to have carried out the plan with perfect success, as had they taken a few more of their number, and used some of their own dead to personate the captives, they could have deceived their pursuers so completely that they would have been thrown entirely off the trail, and kept off until the golden opportunity went by.

The pursuers and pursued being equally well mounted, probably nothing would have resulted from the chase so long as it was carried out as it was begun. The Comanches endeavored to draw them on so far as they could, as every mile thus passed over was more gain for the party that held the prisoners.

The act of exchanging the condemned man's shoes for those of Comanche Dick was to deceive those in the rear into the belief that their favorite leader was done for, and any assistance from him, therefore, was out of the question.

Now and then some of the fleeing Indians arose to the standing position on the backs of their animals, and looked back at their pursuers. They saw, with the grim exultation of the successful warrior, that they had drawn them off from the pursuit, and every thing certainly looked as if their stratagem was about to succeed.

But about noon, the Comanches missed the four horsemen that had been hanging on their rear so long. They halted and looked back, but nothing was to be seen of them. Then they mounted their horses again, and scanned every part of the horizon; but the hunters had dropped below their field of vision, and they looked in vain. So they concluded they had given up the pursuit as hopeless.

The redskins, having no doubt upon this point, once more converged toward their companions, who, from their standpoint, were plainly visible, and the whole body of Comanches began coming together again.

And all this time, Black George and Long Eph were crouching upon the top of the mound, with their eyes strained toward them, and watching every movement of the redskins with the relentless vigilance of the panther creeping upon its prey.

Every movement that passed under their eye—every turn and maneuver of the fast-vanishing horsemen—the long trail of dust which ascended to the air as they skurried over the prairie—the convergence of the redskins—all these were proofs of the correctness of their surmises.

And finally the direction taken by the Comanches, just as they were vanishing from view, satisfied Black George that his suspicions were right in every particular.

CHAPTER X.

TOWARD HURRICANE RIVER.

WHEN the two hunters descended from the mound, their faces showed that their spirits retained, figuratively, the same elevation.

"See yer, younker," said Black George, addressing Middleton, "how much longer do you suppose yer can stand it without eatin'?"

"Eating?" repeated the young man, with an expression of dejection in his face; "I couldn't eat a mouthful with all this trouble at my heart."

"That ain't what I axed yer."

"I never want to eat again till I find her."

"Wal, younker, if you'll only stick to that, I won't ax no more. I feel a sorter holler in my innards that I think I could chuck an ox or buffalo inter, but we ain't got no time to do it. Ef you're ready we're going to lead you on a leetle the tallest tramp you ever see'd."

"I am glad to hear it, for that sounds like business."

"Howsomever, these yer animiles have got to be tended to, or they'll gi'n out, jist when we can't stand it, so we'll give 'em a half-hour or so at that 'ere grass, while we take a smoke, and then we're off for Hurricane River."

The four stretched themselves upon the ground, and the hunters produced their pipes. Walter offered them one of his cigars, but each preferred his favorite clay pipe, and the whole four puffed in unison.

The three men occasionally exchanged words in low tones, but it was evident that they understood each other and each other's plans so well that there was no necessity of explaining any-

thing. They merely indulged in a few speculations as to the whereabouts and the movements of the Comanches.

Middleton's mind was so active, and his heart so wrapped up in the enterprise, that he was almost insensible to fatigue. He had been bluffed so decidedly by Black George on several occasions, that at first he resolved to give him no further opportunity.

But finally his curiosity impelled him to take advantage of the first occasion that presented itself, and he inquired:

"How far is Hurricane River from here?"

"Nigh onto fifty miles, and in the Comanche country."

"When do you expect to reach it?"

"It's got to be done to-night, or not at all."

"I tell you, George, I don't see how it can be done."

"You'll larn, then, before to-morrors' sun-up. We've done the thing once or twice afore, and we kin do it ag'in."

"Must we be there by sunset?"

"Bless yer, no. To explain it to yer—that's a spot whar this Comanche party is likely to cross to git to thar village, and what we've got to aim at is to git thar ahead of 'em, and make a stroke fur the gals."

"Suppose they beat us?"

"Then the jig is up," was the prompt reply. "Once across that 'ere stream, and the redskins are so all-fired thick that a crow couldn't keep from gittin' cotched. I've been on the edge of the country, and I never want to try it ag'in. Jake was carried thar a couple of years ago, and ef it hadn't been that one of thar squaws tuk a shine to him, and piloted him over the river one dark night in a storm, you wouldn't see that ugly mug of his thar, suckin' that pipe."

"What reason is there for believing that we can reach the place ahead of them, when they have several hours' start?"

"As it begins to look as though you war goin' to have a hand in the muss, I'll take the trouble to explain the whole thing to yer," said Black George, whose buoyant spirits made him quite talkative.

"In the fust place, ef them skunks war now aimin' straight fur the crossin' of Hurricane River, thar ain't no hoss livin' that could git thar ahead of 'em. They're goin' twenty miles out o' thar way."

"For the purpose of misleading us, I suppose?"

"That's the ijee. Now, when we start, as we'll do in 'bout ten minutes, from the way them animals ar' eatin', we shall have jist 'bout the same distance to travel to reach Hurricane as they have."

"Then there is no reason to prevent our gettin' there several hours in advance!" exclaimed Middleton, jumping eagerly to the conclusion.

"Ef they keep up the rate they started on, we couldn't do it; but I think we managed one thing well."

"What was that?"

"We made them think that we war too green to s'pect the trick they war playin' off on us—so when they git fairly out of sight, as they've done now, they'll ease up, and take it more easy."

"On account of the captives, I suppose."

Black George took his pipe from his mouth, in order that he might indulge in one of his quiet laughs.

"Not so much as on account of the animiles."

"Tell me, George, since we are into the matter and there are a few minutes left us, why this crossing is the favorable place? Can they not ford the river in some other spot just as well?"

"You're on the ijee ag'in. Thar ain't a ford within fifty miles north or south of this one whar a party of a dozen ain't likely to lose half thar horses in gittin' over. But jist thar the stream stretches out so broad and mild, with such a good, hard, sandy bottom, that a pony won't wet his belly in wadin' over. Thar's whar they'll cross, yer can make up yer mind to that."

There was an emphatic positiveness in the manner of Black George, exceedingly encouraging to one who was in the anxious, doubting state of mind of Walter Middleton, and he took heart, as much from his confident manner as from his words.

"What special advantages will the spot afford us in the way of attack or of rescuing our friends?"

"We shall have them on the hip; we ca'c'late on throwin' 'em into confusion, and gittin' off afore they know what's the matter."

"And how about your leader—Comanche Dick?"

The hunter's eyes sparkled.

"Thar's whar the laugh will come in. Jist 'bout that time, Dick he'll wake up, and when he does that he'll make the fur fly."

"Do you imagine that he suspects your plan?"

"Do you imagine thar's a storm comin' thar?" inquired the hunter, pointing to the rapidly-darkening sky; "and don't you s'pose he knows us well enough by this time to understand what we're drivin' at?"

"I cannot help sharing your strong hope that all will still be well."

"But the thing ain't settled yit," replied George, with a more serious air; "the thing has got to be done, and it's got to be done like a flash of gunpowder. Ef they find thar's any danger of losin' the gals, they'll just bury tha'r tomahawks in tha'r heads; that's what they'll do."

"God forbid!" gasped Middleton.

"That's the style of the Comanche and Apache, when they git cornered. But it's time we war on the move."

The time for talk was over, and that for work had come. The horses had improved their opportunities to the utmost, rolling upon and cropping the grass until they were refreshed enough to undertake the work before them.

Three minutes after the last words of Black George, the four men were in the saddle, with their faces turned somewhat toward the south-east, and their animals swinging along at a spanking pace.

Black George and Jake Jaggleton rode side by side, an easy distance ahead of Middleton and Long Eph, who held the same relative positions. Only at rare intervals did the party exchange words, as the jolting gait at which they were riding made such an occupation anything but pleasant.

The sun had scarcely passed the meridian when it was obscured by the dark, thick-gathering clouds, and a cold wind fanned the faces of the rangers as they swept southward toward their destination. Clouds of blinding dust frequently drifted over their forms, and almost hid each other from view.

Still they kept up their rattling rate, and by the middle of the afternoon they had thrown many a mile behind them.

Middleton now and then glanced at the sky, and wondered that the bursting of the storm was delayed so long. Finally he put the question to his companion, who replied, without turning his head:

"We won't catch that afore dark, and jist 'bout that time we'll be at Hurricane, and it'll be a good thing fur us."

The cold wind blew from every point of the compass, and with such violence at times that it interfered materially with their progress.

Middleton found, in spite of his assertions to the contrary, that his long deprivation of food was beginning to tell, and he looked with some concern at the extended fast before him; but, in the midst of this reverie, he was startled by a whoop from Black George, which sounded faint and distant in the gale.

Looking ahead through the blinding dust, he could see nothing except the dim figures of the two hunters.

"What is it?" he asked of Jake.

"Somethin' to eat, I sorter ca'c'late."

The next moment it was seen that there were some persons in advance of the two foremost hunters, the sight of which had undoubtedly caused the peculiar whoop from Black George.

A nearer approach showed that they had intercepted an Apache family on its travels. As a natural consequence, the red-skins were excessively frightened, and, as flight was out of the question, they made a show of resistance; but a sign from George quieted them, and they halted and awaited their doom in silence.

The next moment the four hunters gathered around a singular-looking party. An old, withered-up man, with a very young child in his arms, was seated upon a miserable-looking horse; beside him was a woman, who, from her old and wrinkled appearance, was probably his spouse, she also holding an infant in her embrace; while on another animal was a fine-looking warrior, painted and armed *cap-a-pie*. His wife rode another horse, and upon a small mustang were the two largest children, while two more ponies carried the baggage of the party.

Their looks of terror showed that they expected little mercy from the white men, and they remained abject and silent, the warrior, however, clutching his rifle in a manner which

showed that he was not in a mood to make a quiet surrender.

Had the afternoon been a clear one, this curious meeting would not have taken place; but in the darkened air, and gusts of dust and wind that continually swept the prairie, the parties did not discern each other until within a few rods, and when it was altogether too late for the Apaches to think about flight.

Black George had quite a knowledge of both the Apache and Comanche tongues, and addressing the warrior rather sternly, demanded where he was going. The savage at first refused to make a reply, but, upon the question being repeated he answered that they were on their way to a village about a dozen miles distant, which they were striving to reach before the breaking of the storm.

This was the first intimation that the hunters had of the existence of such a village so near them, it having sprung up within the past month, as such mushroom communities frequently do among the red-skins. The information might be usefull when they were on their return to the hacienda.

The next question of Black George was the practical one as to whether they had anything to eat with them. This received a negative reply; but the hunter was not deceived, and told the Apache that, unless he produced something right speedily, they would make a search for it.

This was the "open sesame," and the Indian hastened to lay before them a preparation of half-cooked buffalo-meat, and a nameless vegetable mixture, somewhat resembling ground corn, mixed with a dark fluid, of such peculiar appearance, that although half-famished, Middleton hesitated about touching it.

"Don't be afraid; it ain't p'ison," said Black George. "If they'd expected we war gwine to swaller it, they'd been glad to've done it; but folks ain't apt to do that when they 'xpect to eat it themselves—unless they're in love," he added, with a sly look at the inquiring young man.

"What is it?"

"It's something to eat, and powerful good, too."

All this time the hunters were devouring the meat and the preparation like hyenas. Walter hesitated no longer, but imitated their example, and in the course of half an hour, the party had made one of the best and most substantial meals of their lives, fully preparing them for the prodigious task that was before them.

During this gastronomic performance, the Apaches sat sullen and indifferent, waiting until it looked safe for them to move on. They did not exchange a syllable among themselves—the children bearing the same stolid look as the others.

When the hunters had fully satisfied their hunger, Black George returned thanks to the Apaches; and, as it was proper that some compensation should be made for the great benefit they had received, a search was made among the effects of the hunters, and several trinkets were produced—among them a handsome pocket-knife belonging to Middleton. These were handed over to the Apaches, who showed a childish pleasure at receiving them, and again the party moved on.

Walter glanced back, just after starting, and saw the horses of the Apaches moving eastward at a slow walk, and when within a distance less than several hundred yards, they were hid from view by the blinding dust, which was swept with still greater force by the rising wind.

"We're losin' ground," called out George, as he struck his mustang into a still higher rate of speed, which was instantly imitated by the others.

Less than five minutes had elapsed, when Middleton was startled at seeing numerous large snow-flakes skurrying through the air. The atmosphere was full of them, whirling and sweeping so gyratingly in the eddies of the wind, that it seemed none of them reached the ground.

But within the next five minutes they had ceased, and not one was to be seen. It indeed resembled a fairy scene, so quickly had they come, so furiously raged, and so suddenly vanished.

While the thickened, obscured condition of the atmosphere had its advantages, it was in one respect a dangerous state of affairs. It was a fortunate thing for the hunters that they ran upon the helpless Apaches; but it was very probable that the next collision would not be with such a harmless body.

The proximity of the Apache village made it more than probable that numbers of warriors

were scouring the country, in all directions, and a meeting was imminent at any time with them.

Still, this was one of the inevitable risks of this business, and it caused no faltering upon the part of the hunters. All kept a sharp eye to the danger which thus threatened, and their steeds were given no rest.

Slowly the storm continued gathering its forces, and as the afternoon advanced, there were occasional mutterings of thunder in the sky, while the darkness was almost like the effects of a full eclipse of the sun.

When Middleton's watch indicated five o'clock Black George announced that they were a half-hour behind time, and that still greater speed was necessary. How this remarkable man could judge so accurately of the distance they had passed, when there was not the slightest landmark, so far as our hero could see, was a mystery to the latter.

Ever since their start from the mound their progress had been up and down the regular swells of the prairie, and they had not crossed a single stream, or passed a clump of trees on the way, and yet the positive declaration of their leader showed that no doubt lingered in his mind.

The animals showed signs of suffering for water, and Black George said there was a small creek ahead, a tributary to the Hurricane River, which would be reached by five o'clock provided the time they were now seeking to regain was made up.

When Middleton's horse plashed into the water, and stretched out his long neck to quaff his fill, the rider drew out his watch and informed the riders that there were still five minutes to spare.

"We're all right, then," replied Black George; "we've made up all the time. When I started, I told Eph we'd strike this yer creek about six o'clock, and ef we could do it, thar's no fear of the rest. So hyer we ar."

The fellow's face showed that he felt some pride in the feat he had accomplished, and he certainly was justified in some slight degree of egotism.

"I think our animals have earned a little rest," said Middleton, after they had all exchanged views on the situation.

"They don't need it much; but we'll give 'em a few minutes."

"How soon may we expect the storm which has been threatening us so long?" inquired Middleton, looking at the sky with the dark clouds skurrying across it, and with the rumbling thunder still increasing.

"It'll be several hours yet," replied Black George, speaking in his usual emphatic manner, "and yer's as is powerful glad of it. When we come down on them yer skunks, we've got to smash things, and ef we kin only git a right smart chance of thunder and lightning to help us, we kin make the fur fly."

"That yer's the talk," chimed in Eph.

"Time's up," called out George.

At the same time, he turned his horse's head up the bank and started him on; but ere he had taken a couple of steps, he halted and waved his hand behind him as a warning for the others to keep back.

Nothing could be seen or heard, as all three remained motionless, but, after a few minutes, Middleton detected a faint rumbling tread, as if made by the galloping of animals in the distance.

They were evidently approaching; and rising in his saddle, the hunter peered over the slight swell in the bank for a few moments, with a keenness of vision that penetrated further than that of an ordinary man would have done. Then he turned slightly in his seat, so as to make sure that his words would be heard, and uttered the single word—

"Apaches!"

After this declaration, Middleton was prepared for a precipitate retreat; but neither of the hunters made any such movement. On the contrary, they remained motionless, as though they considered their location the best possible one under the circumstances.

Black George continued cautiously peering over the bank, as though he was watching the movements of something which he could only faintly see.

By this time the tread of the galloping horsemen could be heard with great distinctness, and seemed to Middleton that, within the next few minutes, the whole troop would thunder down upon him. He became so nervously apprehensive that he was about to propose a retreat, when Black George commanded absolute silence by a warning motion of his hand.

Within the next minute, the dim outline of

a horseman flashed to view, galloping in a direction parallel to the stream, then followed another and another, until fully a dozen had passed.

They went like the swift-moving figures in a panorama, whisking for a moment in sight, and then out of it again. Then followed the rapidly-diminishing footsteps until they were gone.

The Apaches were aiming for their village, and running a race with the storm, else they might have seen the four horsemen peering over the bank at them."

"They're gone," said Black George, as his horse sprung out of the water and up the bank. "That gives us five minutes more to make up."

Again the hunters gave free rein to their horses, and under the leadership of their chosen member, they made rapid progress toward the Hurricane River.

Several miles yet intervened, when the storm burst upon them. The air flamed with lightning, there was a simultaneous crash of thunder, that seemed to lift the riders off their horses, and then the gates of heaven were let loose. A few large drops of water rattled like bullets around them, and then came the deluge. Driven by the strong wind, the rain came at times almost horizontally, the long, spear-like columns driving against horse, man and rider like a tornado of hailstones.

The men were well protected by their blankets which wrapped them from head to foot, but it came unreservedly upon the poor brutes, that, however, pressed resolutely forward, urged by their riders, who felt that not a moment could be thrown away.

Darkness came with the storm, and had it not been for the vivid flashes of lightning that lit up the scene every few moments, the hunters could not have distinguished each other's presence. The booming and crashing of thunder, the flaming of lightning, followed by the instant inky darkness, the whistling of the strong wind, the furious driving of the rain, all these made up a scene at once fearful, terrific and sublime.

Still onward pressed the hunters, until, above the soothings of the wind, Middleton detected a faint, continuous murmur. At the same instant a vivid, zigzag flash revealed the surface of a broad, smoothly-flowing river, fifty yards in front of them.

"Thar's the Hurricane! Thar's the crossin'!" Black George shouted; but, in the driving wind, his voice sounded faint and distant. The whole company had halted to arrange their course of action. The momentary glimpse of the Hurricane River showed that the ford was rapidly rising, and, unless it was crossed very speedily by the Comanches, there would be trouble on that account alone.

Black George opened his mouth to speak, but, at that instant, the whole air burst out into one sheet of flame, while there was an appalling crash, as if heaven and earth had come together!

The interchange of electricity between the earth and sky found its vent near them, and the ground trembled with the shock. A silence fell on all, and a feeling came over them as if they were standing in the audience-chamber of the King of the Universe.

At that same instant, through the swirl of rain and tempest, a cry reached their ears—the clear, ringing sound of a woman in distress. Like the plaintive note of the cremona, which floats far out beyond the crash of its boisterous companions, so this tone came to them, on the wings of the tempest, faint but distinct!

"That's Josepha!" gasped Black George. "She ain't fur off, neither!"

CHAPTER XI. THE LIGHTNING-STROKE.

It had been diamond cut diamond, and stratagem against stratagem, and the result of it was that the Comanches had been outwitted by their hunters.

The last searching look cast back by the rear party of the Indians failed to show them any signs of the hunters who had followed them so assiduously, and who had broken in so untimely upon their enjoyment of the torture of their prisoner, and then they wheeled off at full speed, and made all haste to overtake their comrades who had the prisoners in charge, and report to them the success of their stratagem.

From the top of the mound Black George witnessed and comprehended the whole movement, and we have just shown how he checkmated it.

The last junction of the Comanches took place near the middle of the afternoon, and the whole company pursued their way at a leisurely rate toward the crossing of Hurricane River, beyond which there was nothing to fear from any designs of their enemy.

It is not at all improbable that the ford would not have been reached until morning, had the progress of the party not been materially increased by the omens of the coming storm; but, as the Comanches make it a custom to carry their dead with them, until they could be given a decent burial, this fact seemed to retard the rate at which they generally proceeded, and was the real cause of the numerous ruses attempted, the object of which was so to mislead the hunters as to give the Indians all the time they needed to make good their fording of Hurricane River, and their safe entrance into their own country.

If there is any one thing which we have impressed upon our readers, it is no doubt the fact that Comanche Dick and his men thoroughly understood each other.

With the last junction of the red-skins, and the few words they interchanged, Dick comprehended the trick they had attempted to play off on his men.

"They think they have succeeded," he thought to himself; "but if they don't hear from Black George and the rest of them, somewhere near Hurricane Crossing, then I don't know my men, that's all."

From this it will be seen that the leader more than suspected the plan of rescue which his followers had determined upon. This was a great point toward the success of the scheme, and it was not to be expected that when the shock came Comanche Dick would not remain a passive spectator.

One-third of the Indians journeying toward Hurricane River were dead! As each man had his own horse, and there were one or two spare ones in the party, when the bullets of the Rangers sent them out of existence, there still remained their faithful horses to them.

With very little trouble, the dead Indians were secured upon their animals in such a way that there was no likelihood of their falling off when proceeding at a sweeping gallop.

It even seemed as if a portion of their matchless skill in horsemanship remained with their bodies even after the departure of life.

It was a ghastly spectacle! A party of Comanche Indians cantering over the plains, with one-third of the riders stark and stiff in death!

The wife of Comanche Dick was held on her horse in front of an Indian, who never uttered a word to her, even when she ventured a question or two.

The jailer of Josepha was no less reticent. His rigid arm, which encircled her slight waist, was never once moved; nor did his dark face approach a hair's breadth nearer than when he first placed her on her perch. When she glanced furtively backward, during the flaming of the lightning, she saw his dark, stolid face ever the same; and, had it not been for the snake-like glittering of his eyes, she would have believed that she was riding with one of the dead Comanches. She made an attempt to draw a word from him either in the English or Spanish, but whether her questions were understood or not can only be conjectured, as her repeated efforts brought not the slightest response.

What was perhaps rather singular, Comanche Dick was allowed to ride a horse alone, but he was so securely guarded, that it looked like a human impossibility for him to effect his escape. His arms were pinioned at the elbows behind, and his feet were fastened beneath the belly of his horse. On each side rode an Indian, and others were in his front and rear. He was not allowed any blanket, and when the rain descended, it drenched him to the skin.

But all the time, this extraordinary man was conjuring up some method of freeing his limbs. By leaning forward when the darkness was so great that he could not be seen, he managed to get a sort of leverage upon his thongs, and to bring his prodigious strength to bear upon them.

The tugs were sharp and painful, but for a long time were of no avail. His repeated failures finally incensed him, and he made a tremendous effort, that snapped them like yarn. At the same instant there was a blinding flash, and he came near being discovered. But his presence of mind did not desert him, and, by holding his arms in the same position, he deceived his vigilant captors into the belief that he still was fast.

The advantage which Dick possessed in gaining the use of his upper limbs, was lost in his lower. No strain that he could bring upon his ankles was sufficient to endanger the fastenings in the least.

Without human help he could not loosen his feet, and where that human help was to come from he could not imagine.

All this time the party were nearing Hurricane River. Night had closed around them, a

night of "storm and darkness." The deluge of water was descending, and those who were not protected by their blankets, were drenched to the skin.

But Dick cared nothing for this. No exposure or hardship was too great for him, and he had no fear of the consequences of such exposure as this.

When he deliberated upon the matter, he saw that the real danger of his remaining helpless in his lower limbs was not so great as he had thought at first. With his arms free, he could control his horse, and, by a sudden onslaught, secure weapons with which to mingle in the fray. The real danger was, that in the fiery, impetuous maneuvering that would instantly follow the assault of his men, he would be so fastened to his animal that his horsemanship might become fatally defective. Should the beast be struck by a bullet, or prove refractory, as had been the case upon the preceding night, instead of being a help to his friends, it would very probably be the other way, and end in the discomfiture of the whole plan of rescue.

The knowledge the Indians possessed of the country over which they were journeying was as accurate and unerring as that of the white men, and through the storm and darkness they never once halted.

Both of the females had blankets thrown over them, which partly protected them from the driving rain. Until this act of kindness upon the part of her captors, the wife of Comanche Dick had been meditating a desperate deed. She carried in her bosom a beautiful Spanish dagger that had been presented her by Josepha, and more than once she was on the point of drawing this and silently pressing it "home" in the heart of the savage who held her prisoner.

It was not any question of humanity that restrained her. It was only the uncertainty as to the prudence of the deed. Would her husband be pleased with it? What good could she accomplish thereby? Could she be the means of serving either her husband or Josepha?

She thought she could help the latter, for her plan included not only the assassination of her immediate captor, but that of Josepha's as well. She believed she could give the fatal blow to one as well as the other, and then in the darkness they could rush away upon their animals.

This was a desperate plan, it is true, but it was characteristic of the wife of Dick, and she was ready at any moment to undertake it, provided she could gain the sanction of her husband to the attempt.

But there was no means of gaining this, as her words would necessarily be heard by other ears than his, and it was more than probable that among the Comanches were several who understood the English tongue.

So she was compelled to keep her counsel, although she would have given worlds for the power of exchanging five sentences with him, without any risk of being heard by others. From his silence and reserve she knew that his brain was not idle, but was concocting some scheme for the good of all.

When the rain began descending, and the Indian threw his blanket around her form, the thought occurred to her that it would be a strange return for his kindness; but the next moment the feeling passed off, and when she came to reflect upon what this same people had done, and what they probably intended to do with her and with her tender young friend, all such emotions disappeared, and it was again simply the question of prudence that kept the dagger from the heart of the savage.

As husband and wife and daughter were in such proximity, and had been so for such a length of time, it seemed to Dick that he ought at least to exchange a word or two with them.

"Do you feel well, Marceda?" he inquired, directing his address to his wife, who shouted back the reply:

"Fery well, but in poor spirits. I am afraid all is lost."

"No, it is not!"

That was sufficient for the wife. She understood that reply in all its length and breadth, and was content to maintain silence.

"And how is my Josepha?" he added, turning his face toward where he supposed her to be from the last flash of lightning that had lit up the blank dark.

"Much encouraged by your reply."

"You have reason to be," was uttered in the same significant manner as before, and then again they moved on in silence.

As nearly as Comanche Dick could judge, they were within a mile or two of Hurricane River when a halt was made. There was considerable talking in a low voice among the red-

skins, but although he strained his ears to the utmost, he could not gain the slightest inkling of what it meant.

His fear was that the plan which he was certain his men were going to act upon was suspected by the red-skins, but as they speedily resumed their progress, traveling at a slower rate than before, he had strong hopes that such was not the case.

As they neared Hurricane River, Dick found himself growing nervous and ill at ease. He was confident that every moment was drawing them nearer a collision, and, fettered as he was, he was apprehensive of the consequences.

Finally he determined on an effort to free himself, and he attempted a feat, which, in his cooler moments, he would not have contemplated.

"Marceda," he called out, "have you your knife with you?"

"Yes," she replied, not a little startled at the question.

"Let me have it—quick!"

Without stopping to consider the strange nature of the request, she whipped it out and reached it toward him in the darkness.

"Here it is."

The Indian who held his wife, furiously struck down the outstretched arm, but, at that instant, the swiftly-grasping hand of Dick had seized it.

Although the words which passed between the two were scarcely understood in the least by the Comanches, yet more than one was aware that some sort of communication had passed between them, and they instantly closed around the hunter to learn what it meant.

Appreciating his imminent peril, the movements of Comanche Dick's body kept pace with the lightning-current of his thoughts. The stiletto-like knife was scarcely in his hand, when it was thrust into his trowsers-pocket, and his arms bowed behind him; and in this rigid position he sat when the next blinding flash lit up the earth and sky.

In the next second he had leaned under his horse's belly, and cut the thongs which it would have required hours to unloose with his unaided hands.

Now he was free again.

"And I don't care how soon they come," he added, to himself.

The next flaming sheet revealed to them that they were within a few hundred yards of the river, and the eagle eyes of Comanche Dick fancied he detected in that momentary illumination of the driving rain, the figures of several horsemen walking slowly toward them.

What he fancied he saw was certainly seen by the Indians themselves, and an unusual movement among them showed that they were making hasty preparations for the unexpected danger which had come so suddenly upon them.

Sensible that the crisis was upon them, Comanche Dick shaped his mouth to utter the Rhoderic Dhu-like signal to his men, but, ere a sound escaped his lips, there came an appalling crash, accompanied by a vivid blaze that seemed to absorb everything, and almost every horse of the Comanche party was prostrated to the earth.

The thunderbolt had burst in their very center!

CHAPTER XII.

TWO THUNDERBOLTS.

EVEN in that supreme moment of danger, Dick was first to recover self-possession. He was stunned for a moment, but the sharp pain of the horse falling upon his feet aroused him, and he freed himself in a twinkling.

Forgetting all about his friends so near at hand, his first thoughts were of his wife and Josepha, and he darted over the prostrate animals and men, where he supposed them to be, calling them by name.

The shriek of terror that had escaped Josepha Navarro, at the bursting of the thunder, had made itself heard even to him, and, ere he anticipated, his hand was upon her. The rain dashing in her face, had already begun to revive her, and with a little assistance, she staggered to her feet, at the same moment that her adopted mother did the same.

By this time, too, several of the Indians began to revive, and the horses commenced floundering and struggling. Brave as the Comanches always are, their first thoughts were of their prisoners, and those who first regained their senses made for them, shouting at the same time to arouse the others who had been prostrated more severely than they.

But now came the hunters. The fortunate catastrophe was comprehended by them, and they turned it to advantage without a moment's delay.

Signals were passed between Black George and Dick like the flashing lightning, and the

latter had scarcely risen to his feet when his friend was at his side.

"Save yer animile!" called out George, "for ye'll need him. Where are the gals?"

"Right by you."

At that instant, Walter Middleton caught up Josepha Navarro, and dashed away with her. Scarce an instant behind him was Dick, whose mustang had just struggled to his feet. When the animal was on all fours again, he held him and his wife upon his back.

Shouts and whoops added to the raging of the tempest, made a perfect pandemonium, and the Comanches were fighting like demons. It would have been tempting fate for the hunters to have made a fight, when their object was to get the women off unharmed, so their whole efforts were turned toward extricating themselves.

This was not done without severe fighting, and even Comanche Dick, with his wife held in one arm, and his knife circling in his other, found himself hemmed in. But his faithful lieutenants came to his rescue, and soon hewed the way clear for him.

With the elements against them, the red-skins lost every advantage they had possessed, and in less time than we have taken to describe it, the whites were disentangled, and together on the open plains beyond.

"Where is Josepha?" suddenly demanded Dick, as the lightning-flash failed to show her among his men.

"She is safe," replied Black George.

"But where?" he demanded, peremptorily.

"We brought another man with us, and he has her."

"Who is he?" he added, only partly satisfied with the reply.

"He is the man who has come all the way from Galveston arter her, and, from what I've learned, he's the one arter all that has more right to her than you."

Dick was only partly satisfied, but as several drizzling shots began to come from the Comanche party, and it was evident that the danger was still upon them, he turned his attention to the peril itself for the moment.

"Give them a round or two if they ain't satisfied," he called, and in response the three men discharged their rifles toward the spot where the red-skins stood.

All the time, the horses were walking northward at a moderate gait. The storm had nearly spent its fury; the flashes of lightning were fewer and lighter, and the fall of rain much less than it had been a short time before.

By-and-by, as the party moved along, Comanche Dick heard the voice of Josepha, and became aware that she was in the party. He then repeated his inquiries, and learned what had taken place since he had been carried a prisoner from the hacienda, and he welcomed the young man as cordially as he deserved to be.

When Josepha was picked up by Middleton, and carried beyond reach of the fight, she supposed very naturally that it was one of the hunters who had done her that favor; but when her deliverer pressed her to him with a fervent embrace and kissed her again and again, she began to wonder what it all meant.

"George," she said, suspecting his identity, "what's the matter?"

"It is not George," was the answer, in a disguised voice.

"Jake then."

"It is not Jake at all."

"Well, then, Eph—"

"Nor Eph either."

A scream escaped the girl, and she struggled.

"Who has me?"

Now our hero had a nice little plot arranged for the edification of his dear friend, but it all failed through his own remissness. When the thought flashed through him, that he was holding Josepha Navarro in his arms, she for whom he had suffered so much, and for whom it were a pleasure to peril his life at any time, and that she did not suspect his identity, then it was that his self-command forsook him, and pressing her again convulsively, he said:

"I am Walter Middleton."

This was uttered in his natural voice, so that there was no mistaking it. For a moment, Josepha was silent, and then a low cry of joy escaped her, and she returned the warm embrace and kiss again and again.

"Can it be my own Walter? Yes, I know it is! How came you here? I thought you were dead! They told me you were! How cruelly they deceived me! How I have suffered!"

"And what were my sufferings, when I came to Galveston, and found that you were gone, no one knew whither, until after long inquiry I heard you had started for Santa Fe."

"Did you follow me?"

"Why such a question?"

And again a warm kiss sealed the utterances of their lips.

During this hasty interchange of words, the mustang of Middleton had been walking at a slow rate. He had wrapped his large blanket around her so as to envelop her entire form, and thus he held her like an infant close to him, and securely protected against the rain, which, as we have shown, was rapidly decreasing in violence.

They had reached this point we say, far enough for each to understand the other, when Middleton became sensible of his imprudence in thus leaving his friends for so long a time. In case of pursuit from the Comanches there was every danger of being cut off and recaptured; and even if that danger was not threatening, there was still the probability of their becoming lost to each other during the darkness.

So he turned his horse around, and guided by the sound of the voices, or rather the voice of Dick, which just then was particularly loud, he speedily placed himself among them.

As soon as it was felt that the great danger from the savages had passed, there was an introduction between the parties, and an explanation given of the peculiar situation in which more than one of them was placed.

The animals of all were thoroughly tired, and they were humored as much as possible, not being required to advance at a faster rate than a walk. The fall of rain entirely ceased, but the dead darkness remained, so that it was impossible to distinguish each other's forms. Had there been any sort of shelter at hand, they would have lain by until morning, despite their proximity to their enemies; but, as all was open prairie around, and not a tree even, they had no choice but to plod homeward through the night—homeward to the ruined hacienda, where they were not certain of procuring a covering for their heads from the driving storm.

The hunters were so inured to hardships, that the night-ride scarcely affected them. It was a trying ordeal to all of them, but there were two in the company who were supremely happy. Need say who they were?

As the mustang walked slowly along, Middleton saw that his blanket was gathered closely about the loved form of Josepha, and holding her face close to his own, they had no difficulty in making their words heard by each other.

And what passed between them then and there, our pen would profane by attempting to narrate. A great wrong had been done by which they had been separated, but Providence had brought every thing right, and they were together again.

All night long the party tramped northward. After midnight the inky gloom was never once relieved by the slightest quiver of lightning. Onward the horses stepped, all traveling as if they were stone blind.

Not a star shone in the sky above, nor was there the twinkle of any camp-fire to guide them. Under such circumstances even the skill of the hunters availed them nothing. Having once turned the heads of the mustangs in the right direction, they could do nothing but trust to their blind instinct, and allow them to go whither they chose.

When they crossed the stream where the pursuers on the previous day had been given a glimpse of flying Apaches, it was so swollen that it was both difficult and dangerous, and not a little time was spent in its passage.

Hour after hour dragged by, and still the mustangs pressed onward, until finally the day dawned, and it was found that the sagacious animals had continued in the right direction and had made good progress toward the hacienda.

A clump of timber was reached during the forenoon, where a halt was made, a fire kindled, and their clothing thoroughly dried. Many of the party were nearly famished, and Comanche Dick went off upon a hunt, from which he returned, bearing the carcass of a young buffalo, which, if not in the best condition, still made them the best dinner they ever ate.

Both men, women, and animals thoroughly rested, the journey was resumed; but the distance was so great that a second night was spent upon the prairie. But the third day brought them within sight of the ruins of the hacienda.

Here a new surprise awaited them, which reminds us that we have neglected Ephraim Hopkins altogether too long.

CHAPTER XIII.

EXIT MANZAL.

WHEN Ephraim Hopkins was thrown headlong by the infuriated ram, he was startled:

still more was he startled by the sudden appearance of Alfredo Manzal; but, when that individual announced his identity, it may be said that he was absolutely thunderstruck and speechless.

He stood stupidly staring at the terrible desperado for a few moments, motionless and petrified.

"Yes, sir; I am Manzal, that you speak of."

With this second declaration the tongue of the Yankee was unloosened.

"Dew tell me! My gracious! ain't I glad to see you. Give me your hand. You're the very man I think that I most wanted to see."

And with his face wreathed in smiles, he reached his hand toward Manzal, but the latter spurned him away.

"No; you don't. You said you would shoot me—"

"What is your full name?"

"Alfredo Manzal, and—"

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared the Yankee, slapping his hand upon his knee. "What a mistake! I meant George Augustus Manzal, the feller that stole my hoss last summer in Connecticut, and that we offered a reward of a hundred dollars for. He's the man I'd like to meet, I bet you."

Ephraim Hopkins thought this was a very ingenious way of getting over the difficulty, but it did not deceive his companion for a moment; but, for reasons of his own, Manzal allowed him to think so.

"I'm glad to hear yer say so, fur I'd jist made up my mind to chaw yer up hull. 'Yas, sir," he added, with his usual fierceness, "Manzal—I'm the man that run off with that gal—I'm the one that tried to kill her, and I'm the one that's goin' to do it, fur it'll be the nicest job I ever done."

"How—how so?" Hopkins ventured.

"Thar's five hundred dollars waiting me in Galveston, when I bring her scalp to a man there. The cussed Comanches come down on me afore I got through, but since then I've fixed things with them, and they won't trouble me."

"You and them be friends, eh?"

"We ain't any thing else, and afore we git through we'll fix up things with the feller they call Comanche Dick, and fur that matter, he's already fixed."

"I heerd they had him."

"That's jist what they have, and by this time his ha'r is lifted."

"My gracious!" exclaimed Hopkins, who was anxious to conciliate his terrible enemy, "you must be hungry. Here's a tender leg of lamb that's done to a turn. Won't you oblige me by making your dinner upon it?"

Manzal was silent a moment, and then he advanced, took a seat upon a piece of timber, and began devouring it with the voracity of a wild beast.

It is safe to say that the Yankee wasn't hungry. The presence of the stranger at the feast had entirely driven away his appetite.

But Hopkins was still suspicious. While the desperado was so busily occupied with his meal, he, under pretense of taking a look at the sheep, made himself sure that his own rifle was well loaded, and ready for instant use.

His first impulse was to steal out to where his horse was grazing, mount him, and flee; but, he was fearful that before he could get beyond reach of the desperado's rifle, he would be shot; and then the animal of Manzal looked as if he were capable of great speed, and he might overtake him, although Hopkins's steed was possessed of extraordinary fleetness.

While he was debating the situation, Manzal turned his head, like a tiger disturbed when crouching his prey, and demanded:

"What are you after?"

"You understand I was left to guard these here sheep, and I thought I'd take a look at them while you were enjoying yourself."

"Never mind about them; I don't like to have a man git behind me, 'specially when he feels like shootin'."

Hopkins obeyed with great alacrity, and no waiter could have been more attentive than he was.

"Would you like something else?" he inquired, when the meat had almost disappeared.

"No!" was the gruff reply.

"There are plenty of nice young lambs out there, and it will afford me great pleasure to prepare you one of the choicest."

"Didn't I tell you I didn't want it?" demanded the desperado, looking as if he were about to spring upon and tear him to pieces.

"Come to think, I believe you did," was the meek reply. "Beg your pardon for my mistake."

But Manzal seemed to become more sullen and vindictive each moment.

The desperado scowled at the Yankee awhile, and then rising to his feet, said:

"Good-by; I must be off."

"Good-by; good-luck to you," called out Hopkins, overjoyed at seeing him move away.

Manzal walked sullenly off until he reached his horse, a short distance from him, when he vaulted upon his back and turned his head away. He had ridden less than a rod when he turned in his saddle, and pointing his gun at the astounded Hopkins, took deliberate aim and pulled the trigger.

Assassination was the villain's favorite mode of fighting, but it failed in this instance, and he never had another opportunity to make the trial.

From some cause or other his gun missed fire, and ere he could repeat the attempt, Ephraim Hopkins brought his own weapon to his shoulder and fired. True to the aim, the bullet crashed through the assassin's brain, and he fell headlong to the ground.

"I think it was Alfredo Manzal, after all, that I wanted to see, instead of George Augustus," muttered the Yankee.

Thankful indeed was Hopkins at the providential manner in which his own life had been spared to him. He felt that he had done right in slaying this monster, and he did not go near him to see whether any life remained in his vile body or not. His affrighted animal dashed away, and continued running at headlong speed until he disappeared in the distance.

By this time the day was well advanced, and Hopkins detected the omens of the storm which has been more particularly referred to elsewhere. His next step was to secure his horse and place him in the shed which had escaped the fire, and then he made preparations for sheltering himself against the approaching tempest.

Now that he had made his dinner, it cannot be said that he had any particular interest in the vast multitude of sheep, whose incessant nibbling of the grass, he observed, was steadily drawing them away from him. He concluded that the dogs ought to attend to them, for the rest of that day at least, and so he gave them no further thought.

When the storm did come, it harmed neither Ephraim Hopkins nor his horse. He smoked his pipe for a long time, and then quietly slept through the remainder of the night.

On the following day he lived on choice lamb, and was in quite good spirits. He was considerably shaken in the afternoon by the sight of a party of Indians in the distance, but they soon disappeared, and he was left alone again.

The following day, just as he had begun to grow uneasy at the continued absence of his friends, they came in sight, and shortly after gathered around him.

CHAPTER XIV.

"ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL."

EMILIA NEGRETE and Alfia Navarro were cousins, who came from Spain to Texas something over forty years ago, and settled in Galveston. Both were immensely wealthy, and strongly attached to each other, but they were very unlike in disposition, the former being dissipated and strongly addicted to gambling, while the latter was a student, with refined and intellectual tastes, rather inclined to solitude, and never so happy as in the bosom of his own family.

A few years after the arrival of the cousins in America, the wife of Navarro died, leaving behind her a single child, Josepha, who has already been introduced to the reader. After this sad event, the father devoted himself entirely to the education of his daughter, and they were hardly absent from each other's sight until he was removed by death, when Josepha was about fifteen years of age.

This blow nearly killed the affectionate child; but she aroused at last, to find that she was left alone in the world, with an immense fortune, safely invested, and only awaiting her maturity to come into her hands, with a few friends, none of whom could ever take the place of the cherished parent she had lost.

The natural consequences of his evil courses followed Emilia Negrete. His fortune soon passed from his hands, and he became entirely dependent upon chance, and whatever his cousin chose to give him. His applications were never refused, and so long as Navarro lived, Negrete never suffered for money.

But with his death came a change. He was too proud to ask of the daughter what he had, unabashed, claimed of the father; but his evil heart at once concocted a scheme by which he hoped to gain all and more than he had lost.

Could he secure the hand of Josepha, as a consequence her fortune would go with her—and so he set himself to work, by every art of which he was master, to gain her heart and secure her rich inheritance.

He probably would have succeeded, had not a troublesome third party appeared upon the scene in the shape of Walter Middleton. The meeting between the young couple was quite romantic, and of such a nature as to make a lasting impression upon both.

Love rapidly grew and strengthened between them, and all seemed going well; but Negrete, although baffled in one direction, did not despair. It was plain that if Josepha should die, her property would revert to him, as next of kin; so he plotted against her life.

He had not the hardihood to attempt it himself; but in such a country as Texas, where outlaws and criminals of every degree have found a refuge from the pursuit of justice, there were not wanting men who, for a price, were ready to perform the deed.

A year or so after the meeting of Middleton and Josepha, and after they were plighted to each other, he sailed north to make his farewell visit home, for the purpose of returning, marrying his betrothed, and settling down permanently in Galveston.

The vessel upon which he sailed was wrecked; but he and most of the passengers were saved. Negrete carried the news to Josepha, and stated that he and several others were lost. Josepha, who had no suspicion of his baseness, believed him, and again it seemed as if she would lie down and die from her overwhelming grief.

Now was Negrete's time. After a while he persuaded her to make a visit to an uncle in Santa Fe, who had been dead several years, but who, by means of forged letters, was made to appear extremely solicitous of a visit from his adored niece.

The journey was quite dangerous, but she was given a powerful escort, which was placed under the direction of Alfredo Manzal, a villain of the deepest dye, who agreed, for the sum of five hundred dollars in gold, to bring back the girl's scalp to Negrete, which was to be the evidence that she had been put out of the way.

The plan well-nigh succeeded. When they were so far removed from civilization as to place her entirely in his power, Manzal revealed the whole conspiracy to her, and then attempted to put it into execution. But his own men were attacked and massacred by a party of Comanches, who in turn were driven off by Comanche Dick and his followers.

The villain Manzal revived, and made his way back to Galveston, where he claimed his reward; but Negrete would not give it until he produced indisputable evidence of the death of Josepha.

So the assassin returned again to New Mexico, and affiliated with the Comanches for the purpose of accomplishing his ends. Our readers already understand enough of his actions here to make further reference to him unnecessary.

When it became known that Ephraim Hopkins had really slain the evil spirit of the whole business, he became a hero, even in the eyes of Comanche Dick and his hunters. The former made him a handsome present in money—more portable and valuable than half his flock of sheep would have been—and the four hunters escorted Middleton, Josepha and the Yankee through Texas, and did not leave them until all danger was passed.

The parting between Josepha and her adopted father and mother was very affecting, and brought tears to the eyes of all. The four hunters and the lady continued to wave their farewells as long as they continued in sight.

Comanche Dick rebuilt his hacienda, where he and his friends remained till the breaking out of the Mexican war, when they joined in that struggle with the same vim and vigor that always characterized them. Black George fell on the heights of Chapultepec, and Long Eph sunk never to rise again after the bloody day at Resaca de la Palma.

Jake Jaggleton and Dick settled in Santa Fe, where, at last advices, they were still living.

Upon Walter Middleton's return with Josepha to Galveston, Emilia Negrete hastily fled, and was never heard of by them afterward. Ephraim Hopkins established himself as a successful merchant in the metropolis of the Lone Star State, and our hero and heroine settled down into that happiest of all mortal states—that of marriage; and the money so safely husbanded by the careful hand of Alfia Navarro was never squandered or misappropriated by either his daughter or her husband.

THE END.

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